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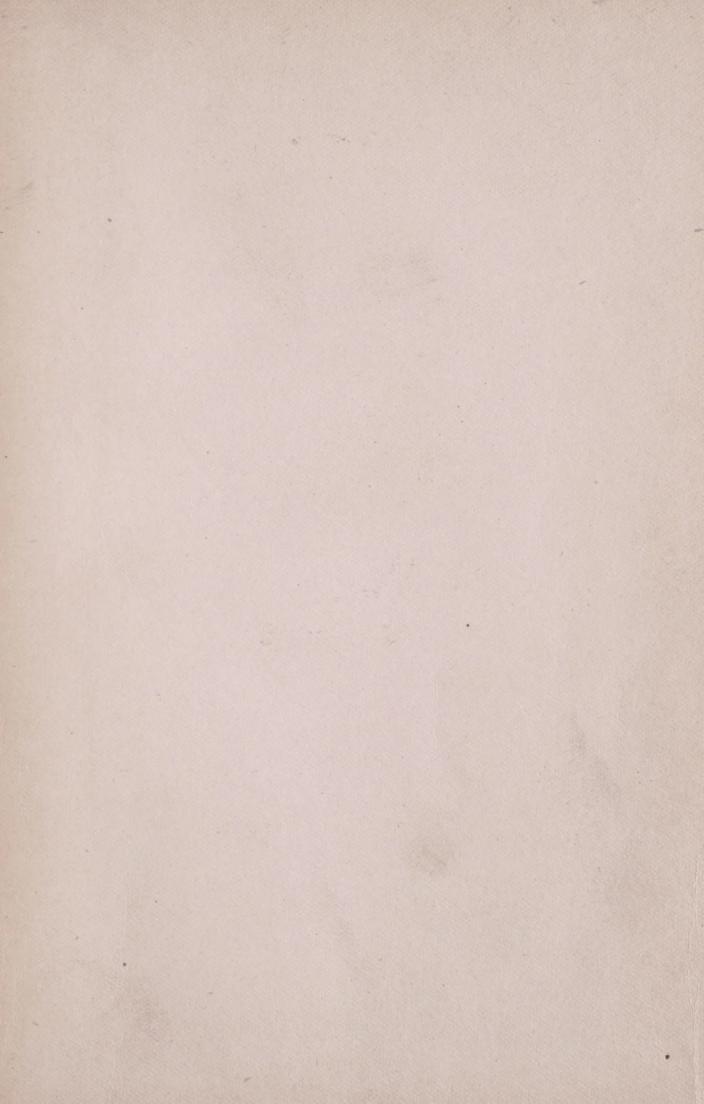
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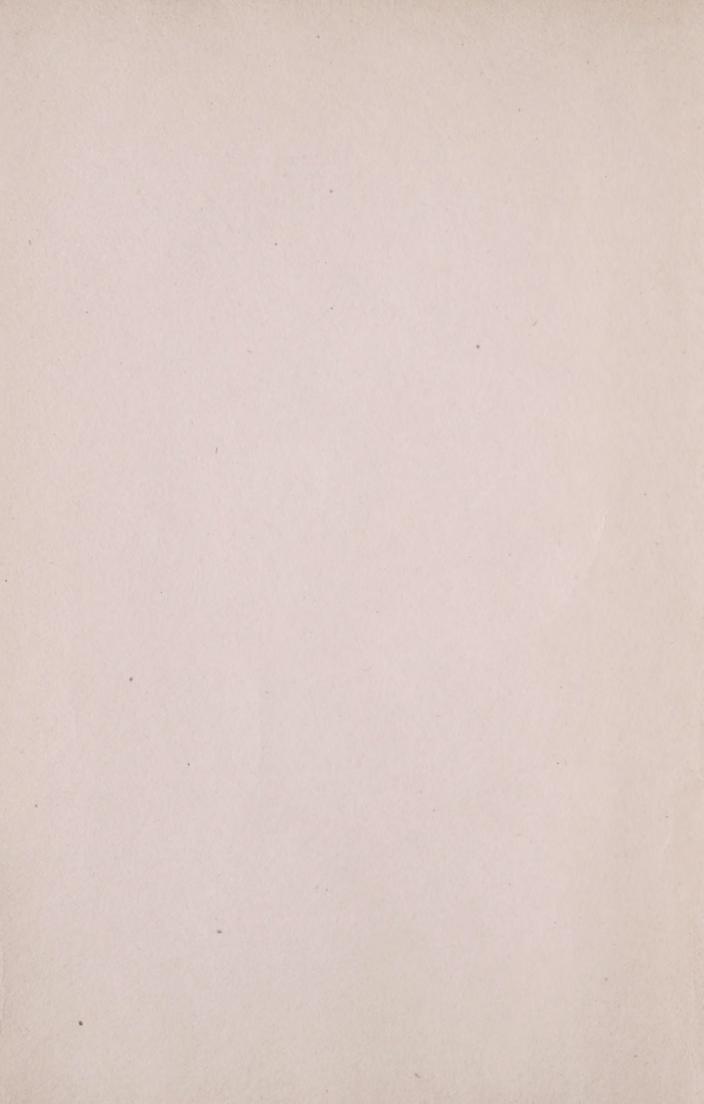


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STELLA HOPE



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BY

EMILY WOODSON BARKSDALE

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STELLA HOPE

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CHAPTER I

Stella Hope was a peculiar child, a fact scarcely to be wondered at by those who knew her father. She loved enthusiastically everything that was beautiful, though all unhand-

some creatures had her tender pity.

She loved nature in all her moods. If the glories of the setting sun inspired admiration, no less did the calm majesty of the rising moon, the blue of the midday sky, the deeper blue of the midnight. She watched the varied green of the waving trees and the many-colored flowers, but what especially filled her with delight was the sighing of the wind-swept pines, the babbling and gurgling of rock-fretted brooks, the matin songs of early awakened birds—and her father's violin.

Her pets were many and various, from the year-old colt Corydon and the white heifer, to the wee, blind mouse, and the cooing dove.

She even loved the brown little pickaninny of Aunt Patsy, the cook, upon whom the said Aunt Patsy had proudly bestowed the uncommon appellation of Polly-Cotty, a name she had treasured in memory since by chance she had caught the term *polycotyledon* from a botany lesson recited by one of Mr. Hope's nephews.

Now these two cousins, George and Tom Has-

kins, orphan sons of Mr. Hope's sister, were, except her father, the sole white companions of Stella. They were provided for and taught by Mr. Hope, and though older than his daughter, were her boon companions. Being a naturally quick child, she was put in a class with her cousins, and soon was able to conjugate her Latin verbs with much more facility than they; but their superior understanding of algebra was to her an unfailing source of surprise and admiration.

The boys were good-natured and never jealous; but to her chagrin they would occasionally slip away from her for a "hunt" or a "fish," though generally they allowed her to accompany them; and she became quite expert

with the rod and the gun.

Whenever they left her in the lurch she would seek her father in his study, and chat with him as long as he was at leisure; for he was a scholar and passed much of his time among his books. But when he became preoccupied she would slip away noiselessly, and, calling Galatea (diminutive "Gal"), the two would run down to the clay bank in the rear of the stable, and there fashion images of clay, fearfully and wonderfully made, until the shrill voice of Aunt Patsy summoned the reluctant "Gal" to the squalling Polly-Cotty.

Thus deserted, Stella would wander around, watching the antics of her pets, or playing with them. On this particular afternoon she was attracted by the splendid varieties of butterflies

hovering over the vari-colored larkspurs growing in the newly harvested wheat-field. Never before had she seen so many gorgeous ones together; and, desirous of showing them to her father, she, all unconscious of the harm she was doing to the beautifully painted wings, caught many of them in her capacious apron, and ran

breathlessly to show them to her father.

Mr. Hope was naturally dismayed when she released them in his study. The struggling, fluttering creatures, despoiled of their brilliant colors, flitted brokenly everywhere among his books and papers, depositing upon them the loosened dust of their wings. He reproved his thoughtless daughter for the real cruelty of such a capture, and in conclusion he said for the ear of "Gal," who was washing dish towels at the kitchen door,

"Don't let me hear again of any of you catching butterflies. If you do, I'll—I'll reckon with you!" which was about the worst threat

that Mr. Hope usually uttered.

"Humph!" remarked Gal as Stella reached her; "humph! I ain't cotch me no butterflies dis year. I bet I goes out ter-night atter dark when de butterflies goes ter roost, an' ketches me some butterflies, too!" a defiance prompted not so much by a real desire for the gorgeous insects as by a spirit of insubordination swelling in her sable bosom—a spirit fostered by the extreme leniency of Mr. Hope.

Aunt Patsy suddenly thrust her head threat-

eningly out of the kitchen window.

"Whut dat yo' say?" she inquired.

"I ain' say nawthin'," replied Gal, shamelessly mendacious.

"Ef I hears any mo' uv yo' mouf, I'll spank

yo' black an' blue!"

"Shucks!" giggled Gal to Stella as soon as they were beyond the maternal ears. "I'se black alriddy, an' I loves ter be blew when I'se up in de tall trees a-wavin' in de win'. Come on, Stella, while Polly-Cotty's sleepin', an' le' 's

go ride our saplin' hosses."

Away they ran, rode their wooden horses to their hearts' content, and afterward went wading in the creek; all of which goes to show the free and untrammeled life that Stella led until she was twelve, when her father, recognizing that she was growing to be a large girl, began to restrict her running at will; and, to keep her about the house, assigned her extra lessons in her Virgil,—a task by no means distasteful to her, for she was an enthusiastic lover of the Latin poet, whose beauties her father pointed out with great taste and discrimination.

About this time he gave her a young squirrel, which she named Dido, in honor of the hapless Carthaginian queen—a name prophetic of the sequel, and to which the modifying adjective infelix might just as appropriately have been

applied.

A year passed. Stella grew taller and prettier; and as she was thrown more and more upon her father's society there sprang up a greater intimacy than she had known before,

and she began to comprehend more fully his

many accomplishments.

About this time one of the boys gave her a battered old banjo, which she learned to play with considerable spirit, and which filled up many a gap between lessons. To her lively jigtunes she would frequently have Polly-Cotty dance, at which times it would have been difficult to say which was the more pleased—Stella, the pickaninny, or the proud mother.

"Boys," said Mr. Hope on the summer morning that his daughter was thirteen, "you may

take holiday to-day if you like."

That they did "like" was shown by the alacrity with which they made for their fishing tackle.

"Oh, father, mayn't I go too?" begged Stella. Mr. Hope regarded his daughter a moment with a glance in which tenderness, commiseration, and determination were curiously blended,

then he answered gravely,

"No, my dear, not to-day. I have something to tell you this morning which must be deferred no longer. Come sit with me here 'Patulae sub tegmine fagi,' "smiling sadly as he quoted from her Virgil, "and I will tell my brave little girl what I should have told her some while ago."

Something in her father's manner brought an indefinable chill, a foreboding, that passed momentarily across the girl's consciousness, but with the gay *insouciance* of youth she shook off

the premonition and, laughing, said,

"Ah! father, you think I am too nearly a young lady to be tagging after George and Tommie. Is n't that it?"

But to his daughter's consternation and distress, Mr. Hope bowed his head upon her shoulder and wept—a sight which was entirely new to her.

"Oh, father; oh, dearest father! what has happened? What have I done?" and in an agony of premature repentance she threw herself upon his bosom and begged for pardon with protestations and promises of amendment.

Her terror and grief were so excessive that it had the effect of steadying Mr. Hope. He pressed her tenderly in his arms, and gathering

firmness he said,

"My dear child, the comfort and joy of my lonely life, you have done nothing either to offend or distress me. It is only my solicitude for your future that makes me sorrow."

Stella quickly raised her head, as a rainfreighted flower lifts its face to greet the re-

turning sunshine.

"Oh, how you frightened me!" she exclaimed, laughing. "But why are you so disturbed about my future? Shall we not always be together, and do all we can for each other's happiness?"

Mr. Hope placed his hand tenderly on her

head, answering slowly and reluctantly,

"No; I must leave my little girl very soon. I have to take a journey to a far country, and I must go alone."

"Oh, father! why cannot I go with you?" she said pleadingly.

"Would that it might be so, my child, but it

cannot be."

"Why, father; would it be much more expensive?"

Mr. Hope paused a moment, regarding the upturned face earnestly and lovingly. Then he replied gravely and significantly,

"No, child, for this is a journey that we are all required to travel alone. No one, not even our dearest, can accompany us along this way."

Stella's eyes, which were gazing anxiously upon his face, were now growing larger and larger with comprehending terror, and an agony of distress. They took in what until this moment they had not discerned—the sunken eyes, the wasted and pallid cheek of disease. Having been accustomed to dwell only on the love-light of those eyes, she had, as would most children, failed to see the creeping shadow of death.

Her passion of grief when she fully understood was pitiable to behold. It required all of her father's philosophy, of which he had much, to calm her sufficiently to induce her to listen to

him intelligently.

"My child," he resumed gently, when she at last lay passive against his arm, "you must not take it so hard. Remember it is the common lot, the inevitable end of all that which we call life. My father and mother went that way when I was a mere youth. Your sweet mother left us eight years ago, and went alone, though I would have gone with her so gladly. Your time will come, and so on to the extinction of all life on this globe. Your youthful spirits will rally from this affliction, and you will walk the highway of life until you, too, shall reach the gates of death, after which, the reunion. It is of this journey through life that I wish to talk with you. I have long known that I could not live a great while. I shall go suddenly; and I must speak now. I have instructed you as best I could, though a man cannot do all for a child that its mother can. You will go to your Aunt Haughton-do not shrink, my child, she is a good enough woman at heart, even if she seems proud and cold. She agrees to take you when I am gone, and will do the best she can for you till you are old enough to make your own living, as I am afraid you will have to do, for I shall leave very little.

"The companionship of your accomplished cousins will give the proper rounding to your education, even if you do not go to a finishing-school. Keep up your studies, and do not forget what I have taught you. I know how fond you are of your Latin,—you will not neglect that,—and review the mathematics and the little Greek you have learned; you may be able to continue it some day. There, there; don't cry so, my dear; I would not say all this if it were not necessary. As to your future conduct—I know you will never do anything to shame your father's memory, or precepts.

When you shall be grown, take heed lest you rush into some unconsidered attachment. know your impulsiveness, so I charge you to be on your guard. Wait till your judgment is formed and prove that which is good. Observe always in your actions the golden rule. I know you are as innocent as a dove; try also to be wise as a serpent. And if any misfortune ever overtake you, or foul-mouthed calumny besmirch you, which Almighty God forbid! trust Him to set you aright.

"Now, my child, there comes Dr. Bannerman; I must speak to him." He disengaged the hand that was clinging to his own, kissed the griefconvulsed face, and rose to meet his physician.

Stella, blinded with tears, rushed out in the garden under the lilac-trees, and flinging herself passionately upon the ground with face to the earth, wept and sobbed with heart-breaking sorrow. For hours she lay there, until the whoops of the successful fishers recalled her to the passing time, when she arose and slipped into her room to wash away all traces of her

tears before again meeting her father.

Day by day after this, with ever-increasing dread, she watched the growing pallor and feebler step of her father; silently—so far as words—watched; though he knew from the expression of fear in her eyes and the tender, clinging touch of her hand what dread thought was ever in her mind. But he forbore to speak on the subject because of her violent grief when he had spoken to her of his death.

So it came to pass that he was at the brink of the dark river ere he or she could realize it. The boys had become strangely subdued, for Dr. Bannerman had informed them of their uncle's condition, cautioning them against loud

talking or boyish romping.

They grew wonderfully kind to Stella, bringing her young birds, mice, and butterflies; now and then awkwardly venturing upon a word intended for comfort, but which generally had the effect of sending her weeping to her room. Poor child! those were sad days, and during the long nights her pillow was wet with unrestrained tears.

Then came a morning when her beloved father did not wake to the voice of love, and when the passing to and fro in the house was

awed and hushed.

CHAPTER II

A pleasant afternoon in the month of May was drawing to a close in one of the Piedmont counties of the Old Dominion. Through the open windows of a large, stately and old-fashioned mansion floated in the cool breezes, laden with the fragrance of jessamine and honeysuckle which clustered in profusion upon the lattice-work of a long, colonnaded portico that looked toward the avenue of magnificent oaks, extending to a bridge nearly a quarter of a mile beyond. Away toward the southwest stretched the long, undulating chain of the Blue Ridge; while to the rear an oak forest of sturdy giants gave to the once magnificent, but now much diminished, estate the name of Oaklands.

Here for generations the aristocratic family of the Haughtons had lived, ever growing more tenacious of caste as the family exchequer became more exhausted and the influence of the

surviving members waned.

This afternoon the whole family, the widowed mother and three daughters together, were engaged in characteristic occupations. The mother, a handsome and dignified woman of forty-six or thereabout, was crocheting a doily. The clear complexion, gray eyes, and brown hair, as yet unsilvered, were pleasant to look upon; and the well-formed mouth, with the strong white

teeth, would be so except for certain hard lines detracting from that softness which is one of

the chief charms of middle age.

Marie, the eldest-born, with twenty-two years struck off from her mother's age, was her mother over again—handsome, graceful, and haughty, but charming when she wished to please; with the same sub-stratum of cold calculation and veiled policy. She was examining some antique jewelry, ever and anon holding up a chain, a bracelet, or a brooch, and laying it apart or putting it back in the casket for future consideration.

Helen, the second daughter, was reclining in an armchair, reading. She most probably resembled her father, for there was no trace of the mother in the frank, laughing blue eyes, the rather short, honest nose, the slightly freckled complexion, and the light, waving brown hair. She was of less stately height than the other two sisters, and had occasionally been dubbed "dumpy" by them, being themselves elegantly tall. But the hand with which Helen held the book, and the arm from which the loose sleeve had fallen away, might well serve as a sculptor's model.

Ethel, the youngest daughter, the acknowledged beauty of the family, was really beautiful; being exceedingly fair, golden-haired, just entering her nineteenth year, and but a few days emancipated from a fashionable boarding-school. She was occupied in trying over a new lot of popular songs.

"Your face is your fortune" had been so frequently said to her that she well knew she was beautiful. Her head was already filled with ideas of belledom and conquest, and she regarded physical perfection as the basis of woman's influence. She had another rich endowment—a voice of exquisite sweetness and power, and now she was softly singing over the different airs before her with no especial pleasure in the music, but simply as a means toward a much desired end; for it was expected of her to make a brilliant marriage and to restore the prestige of the family. She now turned toward the group, raised her arms wearily over her head, and exclaimed,

"Mercy on me! how stupid you all are! Beg your pardon, mother, I mean Marie and Nellie. I declare it is almost as dull as school. Let's

talk about the summer campaign."

Marie took no notice of the reflection upon her powers of entertainment; Mrs. Haughton shifted her position uneasily, but remained silent. It was Nellie who laid down her book good-naturedly.

"Plans for the summer campaign! This, my dear Sis, can be disposed of in short order—canning fruits for the winter campaign, with probably a few diversions in the way of country

picnics and informal dances."

Ethel's only response to Nellie was a glance of mingled anger and contempt. Then she turned to her mother; but as the latter still continued silent she said to her second sister, "You may enjoy such diversions if you like, but you will not have me as a companion. Mama faithfully promised me that if I would practice my music and graduate she would give me the season at The White. Didn't you, mama?

Thus directly appealed to, Mrs. Haughton, though accustomed to authoritative rule in her

family, hesitated a moment uncertainly.

"I did promise, my dear, and you have performed your part of the contract entirely to my satisfaction; but I have unwillingly been compelled to relinquish all idea of giving any of you a trip this summer. The failure of the wheat crop, the burning of a tobacco barn, and the distemper among the horses have crippled my resources to a great degree, and I cannot keep my promise to you. I trust you will bear the disappointment gracefully, my daughter, for you are so young you can afford to wait another year."

Mrs. Haughton stopped speaking, astonished at the effect of her words; for Ethel's face had been undergoing such rapid and marked transitions as to be almost alarming. First a flush, then paleness, and lastly a deep crimson of indignant anger, with a sudden flood of tears and

lamentations.

"I think it is too hard for anything! After being cooped up for a whole session in school I am to pass another year without seeing a living soul!" she sobbed.

"Why, little Sis, you surely will not deny

souls to your mother and sisters, to say nothing of our good neighbors, the Joneses, the Smiths,

and the Browns," laughed Nellie.

"Helen, be silent!" commanded her mother sternly. "Of course, we can all understand her disappointment, and she cannot regret it more than I do. There, there, my dear, I hope you may yet have abundant opportunities to exercise your gifts and accomplishments."

Up to this moment Marie had not spoken.

Now she broke in with impetuosity.

"I am sure it is not nearly so bad for Ethel as it is for me. She has all her belledom before her, while I have been on the tapis for several seasons."

"Let's be accurate and say six," interpolated

Nellie.

"For several seasons," continued Marie, bestowing no notice upon her sister, "and should be thinking of establishing myself."

"A little thought upon so momentous a question would have been in order several seasons

ago," again ventured Nellie laughingly.

"Helen, leave the room instantly!" said her mother sharply.

"I will not say another word, mama."

"No; go at once!" And Nellie, always glad to avoid unpleasant scenes when she could not avert them, went out, leaving them to discuss and arrange the social and domestic affairs as best they could.

Ethel, only half reconciled to the maternal arrangements, soon stepped out upon the por-

tico to meet the servant with the post-bag; but Nellie was ahead of her and seized the budget.

"Here's a letter for you, Ethel—two of them," she said, in a conciliatory tone, but Ethel snatched them ungraciously. Nellie continued. "One for mama—none for me. As usual, a bridge is made of my nose; no wonder you all call it flat," and she went in, singing lugubriously, "No One to Love."

"Here's a letter for you, mama, with the

St. Louis postmark," she said.

"Dear me! from whom can it be?" and Mrs. Haughton hastily broke the seal and read. When she had finished it she said with some

repressed excitement,

"Come here, girls, and listen. Do you remember your cousin William Willoughby from the West, who made us a visit one summer, eleven or twelve years ago, with his son, young Will? I remember into how many escapades he led you, and I suppose you have a vivid remembrance of it also. Well, his father died some years ago, and I heard he left the boy an immense property. This son has been terribly injured in a runaway accident and his physicians declare his spine incurably affected. Will has, it seems, been bedridden most of the time since his accident, but is now able with the aid of crutches and a helping hand to hobble along a little. He remembers what he is pleased to term my charming home and Virginia hospitality, and wants to come, with his servant, and

companion—hired, I suppose—and stay as long

as he finds it agreeable."

"A very modest request for one self-invited," observed Marie laconically, and making no remark upon the accident of her cousin and old-

time play-fellow.

"Poor, dear Will! how very sorry I am to hear of his misfortune. I remember him perfectly and how he used to say that when grown he intended to come back and marry Marie. Poor fellow! I sincerely hope his injuries may

not be permanent," said Nellie quickly.

"He has learned by some means," Mrs. Haughton continued, "of my reverses, and declares he will not come unless I allow him to pay handsomely for board and all the trouble that he expects to give me. Of course, I must demur at remuneration—for form's sake—but it will come in most opportunely"—

"Oh, mama!" interrupted Ethel, her face

aglow with expectation.

Her mother nodded smilingly and continued,

"He wishes to be on the first floor and his companion to have a room adjoining; but I scarcely see how I can give up more than one room to them downstairs. His servant will stay in the room with him, but I have no room below stairs for the hired companion."

"Why not roll the office close to the house, and cut a communicating door as they did at the Jones's last summer," suggested Nellie.

"A most excellent idea! It shall be done at once. And, as a reward for the bright sugges-

tion, you shall have the pleasure of arranging the room, my daughter," said her mother, smil-

ing approvingly.

"And what shall be my reward?" asked Marie, with some acrimony. "Ethel is to have a season at The White; you have just named Nellie's"—with an approach to a smile—"and I am the only one left out, it seems."

"You shall have the reward of looking after the comfort and entertainment of Will while Nellie and myself are canning the fruits and attending to other household affairs," answered

her mother blandly.

A long and animated discussion of projects and plans followed. Ethel was in raptures of delighted anticipation, Nellie was interested in her room furnishing for the companion of her cousin, and only Marie was the disgruntled appointee.

Mrs. Haughton, well pleased at the prospect of a handsome remuneration, seated herself to answer the letter, and to insist on the immediate coming of her young kinsman, his servant and companion, the last to be least considered in her

estimation.

"What a pity," she remarked to Marie significantly, as she sealed the letter, "that Will

did not come before he was injured."

For the ensuing ten days everything was in a state of commotion and anticipation. Marie hurried off to Baltimore to make selections for Ethel's outfit, a dressmaker was summoned from the city, and Ethel was in a delirium of

delight when, on Marie's return, the various articles were unfolded for inspection; but Nellie was her mother's faithful and efficient coadjutor in all that pertained to the coming of the expected guests.

The young heir's apartment was made the most attractive and luxurious in the house; but that of the companion-friend was painfully bare, with its white-washed walls and its rickety

furniture.

"I must make it look very different from this," Nellie had said, on entering upon her task; and now, as she was putting the finishing touches, she surveyed the room with much more

pleasure.

"I know he cannot help noticing the difference and contrast, even yet," she mused. must be a trying position if he be a gentleman. I am afraid, through sheer sympathy, I shall like him the best, simply because Cousin Will wrote mama not to put herself to any particular trouble on his companion's account. I do so dislike selfishness; but I suppose all sick people are selfish for the time. It certainly was very kind of Cousin Will, and considerate, to send mama such a generous cheque in advance. Now these scrim curtains look cool and sweet, and this is a dear little table with my cover and the vase of flowers. I am almost sorry to part with The bureau and washstand are rather the worse for use, and several knobs are missing, but I daresay he will not mind that. rocker is very comfortable if it does not fall to pieces. I tried my best to make it secure. Perhaps I had best put a nail or two more in it. I wish the walls were not quite so bare, but I have taken nearly all of my pictures and robbed mama of one. I must beg her for just one rug."

Thus she soliloquized, all unconscious of the attractive picture she herself made and how much her gentle consideration for the comfort of others was enhancing the beauty of her own countenance, made lovely with a far higher attractiveness than that of faultless features.

"There!" she exclaimed suddenly, "can they have arrived already?" and she ran out just in time to see a carriage drive up to the front

door.

CHAPTER III

"How painfully thin Will looks! There is scarcely a vestige remaining of the handsome boy of twelve years ago. Only his eyes, which I remember were a beautiful brown, retain anything whatever of a familiar expression to me," remarked Mrs. Haughton after her unfortunate kinsman, exhausted to the point of collapse, had been conveyed to his room.

"He certainly has no pretensions to good

looks now," said Marie carelessly.

"Oh, Marie! how can you even think of looks in connection with an almost dying man?" exclaimed Nellie reproachfully. "We should rather be considering how best we may contribute to his comfort and recovery. Poor fellow! I fear he will never recover entirely."

"Mr. Weston has the appearance and manners of a gentleman, although, as mama said, he is no doubt hired," remarked Ethel, twirling

the rings upon her fingers.

"Is the circumstance of his being hired entirely incompatible with his being a gentleman?" inquired Nellie; then added, "People have to do many things for a living nowadays that would not have been thought of before the war."

"Just listen to Nellie's democratic ideas!" said Marie scornfully. "I believe she would as lief be seen walking with Miss Lovell, our dress-

maker, as with the first lady of the land. I think Cousin Will's companion has manners entirely too easy for one in his position, don't you, mama?"

"Marie thinks he ought to feel overwhelmed in her august presence; but it is plain to me that whatever his present position, whether paid companion or not, he has the bearing of one accustomed to cultured society; and his personal appearance is decidedly prepossessing," retorted Nellie, always on the side of the attacked.

"Say no more on the subject, any of you," commanded Mrs. Haughton. "I cannot afford to have Will offended through any discourtesy to his companion. Be always scrupulously polite to him without being familiar. You are not obliged to marry him, Marie, so it does not matter one way or the other. I think, myself, his whole manner is a trifle independent; but there is always a way to check advances. I repeat, be polite, but not familiar."

It was an evening or two after this, when Mr. Weston was again under discussion, that he made rather an unexpected appearance. There was an awkward moment, no one knowing just how much—if any—he had heard of their con-

versation.

The matron was the first to recover herself as

she remarked pleasantly:

"Take a seat with us, Mr. Weston; it is pleasanter out here on the portico." And as he seated himself she continued: "I trust that

Will may soon feel equal to joining us here also."

"He is feeling more comfortable this evening than at any time since his arrival, and I trust that after he shall have recovered from the extreme fatigue of travel he will be better than at any time since his accident," replied Mr. Weston, who had seated himself near Nellie.

"Do his physicians despair of an absolute

cure?" she inquired.

"None of them has ever said so in just so many words; neither have they held out any sanguine hope; but they all recommended very careful attention, cheerful companionship, nourishing fare, and the avoidance of worry or undue fatigue."

After a little desultory conversation in which, as an *olla podrida*, each one of the family threw in a scrap in the shape of a rather spiceless remark, the young man turned again to Nellie and

said:

"Your cousin is passionately fond of music—especially vocal music—and desires me to ask one of you ladies to sing for him some of the old-fashioned songs."

"I sing not quite so well as a jay, but my younger sister here warbles like a nightingale and will be delighted to oblige him," answered

Nellie, laughing.

"Most cheerfully, if my poor efforts will contribute to his pleasure," consented Ethel, in no wise averse to complying with the request, especially as the enforced restraint of the past few days was becoming irksome. "Will he be

able to hear?" she asked, rising to go in.

"I have left the door ajar. He will not fail to hear the softest note," replied the young man, rising also as if to attend her.

"Pray don't trouble yourself to attend me; I sing the old songs without notes; besides, it is so much pleasanter out here," and she went

in and began singing.

As the first clear, liquid notes floated out on the summer air, Weston made a movement of surprise and pleasure; then he settled himself

to enjoy it.

But to the sick man upon his couch, who for months had heard no female voice in music's witching strains, the effect was rapturous. To him the notes of the invisible singer appeared to float down from celestial heights, soothing and infusing new hope. For the first time since his misfortune tears gushed gratefully from his eyes, while an infinite longing to see the musician took possession of him.

"She must be good and beautiful to sing so soulfully as that," he said to himself when at length she ceased; and he closed his eyes, soon

falling asleep in sweet peace.

When Nellie and Ethel descended some mornings later the invalid had, at his own command, been attired and wheeled in his rolling-chair out upon the back piazza to enjoy the fresh and fragrant morning air. He knew that this step would not have met with the approbation of his friend Weston, who had not yet appeared, but

he bowed smilingly to his cousins and holding

out an emaciated hand said:

"Come and shake hands with me, dear cousins, and allow a poor wreck of a man to renew acquaintance after so many years. Confess, now, that you would never have known me."

"We are rejoiced to see you able to be out,"

said Nellie feelingly.

"Yes, indeed; I hope you are enjoying the roses," added Ethel, looking as pretty as one of them.

"Enjoying! it is like coming out of an inferno and entering into Paradise. It surely was an inspiration which brought me here. But which of you was it that has been charming away my pain with the sweetest music ever heard? Are you the *Lorelei?*" he questioned, looking at Ethel's golden hair.

There was such tender, reverential admiration in his glance that she, who had been designing to sit unmoved while hosts of admirers should be bending before her, could not restrain

a pleased blush as she replied:

"Ah! my cousin, I see that you have at least not forgotten the art of flattery. I am only a little country-bred maiden, a novice in the art of pleasing," and she smiled brilliantly at him.

"How wonderfully improved he seems since the day of his arrival," remarked Nellie, apart to Weston, who at that moment appeared, and was regarding the invalid with amazement.

"Yes," said Weston, with an affectionate look

toward him, "I have never seen such a change for the better come over any one as over him since he first heard your sister sing."

"What a pity, then, that she is to leave home

so soon," said Nellie.

"Going away? when?" he asked in dismay.

"To the White Sulphur Springs, next week,

to remain two months."

"How bitterly disappointed and chagrined he will be, poor fellow! Please do not let him know it any sooner than can be helped. I am afraid he would cease to improve if he knew it now."

"Two months will not be so very long; but I will caution all not to speak of it if you think

best."

"Do, please; it will be a real kindness." Then he went forward to Will, while Nellie beckoned Ethel and asked her not to refer to her going away; at which tribute to her powers of captivation she smiled condescendingly.

Marie now came out and greeted the poor cripple with effusive cordiality. She reminded him of some of their youthful frolics, and then breakfast was announced, it being arranged that Will was to have his al fresco, and Ethel was detailed to keep him company, for he seemed loath to lose her from his sight. Accordingly, remembering that to him she owed all her anticipated pleasure, she exerted herself to be as charming as possible.

He insisted upon remaining on the piazza in company with his cousins, until at last Weston, observing how really feeble he was becoming, motioned his servant, Nichols, and the two wheeled him into his room, notwithstanding his protests.

"My dear Weston, have a little more mercy on a fellow who has been so long penned within walls," he protested. "Do let me enjoy myself

a little longer."

Ethel, chafing under her detention from the sewing-room, now hastened away to Miss Lovell, who was, metaphorically, up to her neck in ribbons, laces and gauzes. She had just put the finishing touches to a pale pink silk and chiffon creation, and when Nellie entered the room a few minutes later Ethel had robed herself therein and was contemplating her beautiful image with great complacency.

"'Italia! O Italia! thou hast the fatal gift of

beauty,' "quoted Nellie smilingly.

"The fatality of any one's beauty ought not to affect you, Nellie, since yours is of a kind to injure neither yourself nor anybody else," re-

torted Ethel with serene pertness.

"Beauty is only skin-deep," ventured the timid little dressmaker; and then blushed at the liberty she felt herself convicted of taking. The arrogant young beauty made no comment except a supercilious lifting of the eyebrows; but Nellie laughingly finished the adage, "and ugly is to the bone," a truism of which I never could find the comfort." Then turning to Ethel, "I suppose, my beautiful sister, there will not

be the slightest chance of having my dress cut

and fitted till yours are all finished?"

"I suppose not," replied that unselfish maiden laconically, still surveying her charming image.

"But I could make it myself, if Miss Lovell could take the time to cut and fit it. I want it

for church next Sunday."

"But indeed and indeed, Miss Lovell will do no such thing," cried the younger sister angrily. "Aunt Barrington is even now waiting, and urging mama to have me ready next week. Mama would not allow Miss Lovell to do it, even

if I were willing, which I am not."

"All right, your royal highness; I can wait. I am thankful that my beauty is also of a kind that will keep, and does not require such fine toggery to enhance it." Then she continued banteringly, "I say, Ethel, you have already made one conquest. Cousin Will has fallen in love with you. Mr. Weston declares that he seems to have taken a new lease of life since he first heard you sing; and he begs us all not to let him know of your intended absence, for fear of the blighting effect. Mama would oppose your going if she knew."

"Pshaw! Nellie, what utter nonsense," exclaimed Ethel, both pleased and fearful lest her trip might be shortened or postponed entirely.

Weston took advantage of Will's protracted sleep to go out on a squirrel hunt through the oak forest. But he had waited too late, the squirrels having all hidden away.

"Shade of Nimrod! I have had enough of bootless tramping for one day," he exclaimed, throwing off his hat and coat before sinking into the comfortable rocker of which Nellie had deprived herself. "Confound the squirrels! they have such a tantalizing way of hiding themselves, and not even showing an eye. I will go earlier to-morrow."

The next morning, as soon as he had seen Will comfortably disposed, he again took gun in hand and sauntered off for the woods; but the frisky denizens of the forest were as coy as on the previous day, and he turned his steps in another direction.

Disgusted at last with his ill luck, he was turning about to retrace his steps homeward when his quick ear caught the sound of music. In much surprise he looked around in every direction, but could perceive no sign of the musician. A moment later he distinguished sounds of gleeful laughter.

"What can it mean in this secluded spot?" he asked himself, and listened intently. He found that the sounds came from behind a hedge of shrubs, briers and wild grapevines which, like a green wall, followed the course of a small wood-

land stream.

This wall was apparently impenetrable by even so small a creature as a rabbit; but following it a short distance, Weston came to a place where the briers were less dense, and forced through without being badly scratched. Creeping a few paces down the stream he soon arrived at a point where by parting the foliage of a grape-vine he could command a view of the environment beyond without exposing himself.

The scene which he now looked upon might

well be the haunt of elves and fairies.

The stream which rippled and gurgled over large boulders, gray with moss, formed here and there pellucid pools and tiny cataracts. It was bounded on the side he now approached by a beautiful and secluded meadow, green and smooth as velvet, where daisies, buttercups, and other flowers bloomed; and the plashing of the waters over the rocky bed formed a running accompaniment to the twitterings of the birds and the humming of bees among the flowers.

But the occupants of this sylvan scene! Weston came near betraying his presence by a loud

whistle of astonishment.

Seated upon a rock not a dozen paces away was a young girl, under the protecting canopy of wild honeysuckle, clad in a robe of some flimsy white material, arranged to fall in classic folds around her form and loosely cinctured at the waist with a girdle of the honeysuckle, while upon her abundant, dark, flowing hair rested a chaplet of oak leaves.

In lieu of the classic lyre that should have accompanied this garb she held in her hands a much-battered old banjo. Her shapely arms were bare to the elbow, where the long "angel sleeves" fell away. Her face, as she now turned it in his direction, was not actually beautiful, though giving promise of beauty, but was bright

with intelligence and beaming with mirth. Her well-shaped mouth was relaxed with laughter and the dark gray eyes were sparkling with life and health. She looked to be about fifteen.

The attendants of the girl were astonishingly bedizened. The whole coterie seemed a blending of ancient mythology with the most grotesque of modern appurtenances. This coterie consisted of a dozen little negroes of both sexes, designed, no doubt, to represent Pan, with the fauns and satyrs. They were all at this moment dancing with great abandon to the tones of the cracked banjo, manipulated with no unskilful hand by the presiding genius of the meadow.

The gay freedom of the girl's attitude, her evident enjoyment of the mock mythics, delighted the amused beholder, giving token of a young life as yet unbroken to the artificial con-

ventions of society.

At this instant a piece of rock against which the young man was leaning gave way, and with a loud, crashing sprawl he fell, his gun exploding at the same moment. Picking himself up as quickly as he could, he looked round in great alarm to see if he had killed or wounded any of the revelers; but he was amazed to find the meadow as silent and deserted as if it had never been trodden by human foot. If the earth had suddenly opened and swallowed them up the disappearance could not have been more complete.

"Whew! am I dreaming, or did I just see a wood-nymph? A bewitching picture! I wonder who she can be? Some rustic maiden with a smattering of mythology, I suppose. Well for her that Comus instead of Melpomene was the patron deity, or there might have been a tragic ending to the sport," and laughing at the absurdity of the whole scene he was in the act of beating a retreat when his glance fell upon the banjo which the girl, in her hasty flight, had dropped upon the ground.

"Ha! I shall have a clue; Cinderella's slipper! Shall I wait till she returns for it and compel her, as the price of its restoration, to declare her identity? or shall I keep it and trace her by means of it? That will be the better

plan."

So, lifting the abandoned instrument, he carried it home, taking care to slip into his room

unobserved.

CHAPTER IV

"Will I find my Dryad again?" Weston asked himself the next morning as he started out for the woods and felt more interest in the exploration of the forest than before. It was, therefore, with extreme caution that he approached the spot where he had seen the young girl, but the place was silent and deserted. Had he frightened her away? With an unaccountable feeling of disappointment, Weston stood meditating awhile over the circumstance, and then turned a trifle sadly away into the wood. He took a different route homeward, and had neared the edge of the forest when, glancing up, he espied a squirrel perched in full view upon a limb of a huge oak inclining somewhat as if, in a storm, it had been bent. Quickly bringing his gun into position he fired, and the little creature fell to the ground.

He was stepping forward to pick it up, when from behind the bole of the tree there sprang a young girl, and caught up the wounded squirrel. It was quivering in the last throes of death, and as she realized this the tears fell from her eyes and she cast upon the slayer a glance of bitter

reproach.

"Oh! sir, how could you, how could you?

The bright blood was welling from the heart of the little victim and was staining her hands; but she gave no heed to that. Convulsive sobs were shaking her frame as she repeated, "How could you?"

Weston was struck with remorse for his act; and stepping quickly toward her, he said feel-

ingly:

"I entreat your forgiveness; I assure you I thought it a wild squirrel. I would almost as

soon have shot myself."

There was so much genuine regret in his tone, so much distress, that she could utter no other word of reproach. In her sorrow she stood entirely unconscious of herself, her whole mind concentrated upon the now lifeless little animal in her hand.

"Don't cry," he said kindly, "I will ransack the whole wood for another to take its place. I will engage every negro boy on the plantation to procure you one," but she burst into fresh sobs.

"Oh! if you could give me a thousand, not one could take the place of my poor Dido. No other could be the same to me."

"Why so?"

"Because—because my dear father gave it to me not long before he died; and—and it knew and loved me so."

Despite his deep regret, he could not repress a smile. *Dido!* the name instantly explained the mythological scene of the previous day. "See," he said tenderly, "your hand is all stained with blood. Allow me to wipe it off, and to relieve you of the poor little body"; but she held it the more tightly.

"Then let me help bury it."

"It may not be quite dead," she replied, turning it over in her hand.

"Ah! yes, it will never breathe again," at

which confirmation her tears flowed again.

He took the dead pet from her reluctant hand, wiping her fingers tenderly with his handker-chief as he did so.

"Where do you wish it interred?" he inquired as solemnly as if it had been a dead child.

"Here," she answered, walking behind the tree. He followed, then paused in some surprise at her ingenuity; for beneath the bent trunk of the great tree there sprang a wild grape-vine, and from its contorted stock she had fashioned a rude but comfortable seat, the comfort further enhanced by a broad shingle upholstered with grass, while the back was interwoven with pliant twigs—the whole as inviting as a wicker chair. The bole of the tree, aided by the foliage of the vine, was a screen against observation. On the other side hung a bottle of ink, and on the seat lay an open Virgil with a slip of paper containing a few lines neatly scanned.

"This spot," she explained with a sorrowful and modest smile, "I have named my study, and in good weather I pass a good deal of my time here. And here I wish poor little Dido buried"—a suppressed sob.

He looked for something with which to dig

the grave.

"Ah! this will serve admirably." Picking up

a sharp-pointed stick and setting to work he soon dug a hole a foot deep in the soft, loose earth. He then silently paused, indicating that

all was ready.

"Wait a moment," she said, and reaching up into a hollow of the tree she drew thence a box of writing material, and emptying it upon the seat she handed the box to him. He drew out his handkerchief for a winding sheet.

"Any obsequies?" he asked with much as-

sumed gravity.

"No," she replied with all seriousness. "We are taught that animals have no souls; but I think some of them have more than some

people."

He looked at her in surprise. The slight soupçon of incipient cynicism in the remark struck him as strangely odd in one so young. Was it merely a remark of thoughtless youth, or had the girl already, through unpleasant contact with soulless natures, received a shock to faith and trust? He would probe this matter. He was about to lower into its untimely grave the mortal remains of the namesake of the Carthaginian queen when, with a piteous look, the young girl held out her hand for it. He surrendered it, and she took a last farewell of the little pet she had loved so well. He waited in perfect reverence, and when she returned it to him, calmer and more resigned, he proceeded with the interment. When he had finished he paused and looked earnestly upon her.

"Do you think," he asked, "that it is safe for you to pass so much of your time here alone?"

"Yes, I suppose so; I have never thought about it; I am so near home, and then some of the little darkies are nearly always within call."

"Is that your home there? Is Mrs. Haughton

a relative?"

"Yes, my father's sister. I have lived there two years; ever since my father's death," and at the mention of that father the quick tears flowed afresh from her eyes.

"Why have I not seen you before?" he asked,

surprised.

"Because I have been away on a visit. I returned only two days ago."

"Why have I not seen you at meals, at least,

since your return?"

She blushed and hung her head. "I do not like to go among strangers," in a low voice.

"But why?"

"Oh, because I have seen so few in my life."

"So much the more reason you should meet them now."

"And then—and then—" she hesitated.

"Then what?" he asked.

"Because my aunt and Cousin Marie say I

have no manners," with deep humility.

"Humph! I have not perceived the deficiency," laughed he. Then with a glance of interest he inquired, "Are you happy there?"

"I would not be if it were not for Cousin Nellie. Cousin Marie has lovely manners when there's company, and Ethel's singing is so lovely, but I am—not very happy anywhere since I lost my father."

"Poor child! Will you let me be a friend?"
She looked with tear-wet eyes searchingly into his own, and then evidently satisfied,

frankly gave him her hand.

"Yes; I have so few," she said simply.

"I hope you will not hate me for Dido's death."

"No; oh, no; it was not your fault," and there above the tomb of the lost pet the compact was sealed—the establishment of a friendship born of sorrow, sometimes the sweetest and purest that can cheer human life.

A bell rang sharply at this moment from the rear of the Haughton mansion. She started.

"Dear me! I didn't know it was so late. Aunt Kate will be angry. The cucumbers and tomatoes are still to be sliced," and without another word she turned and ran rapidly homeward, while Weston turned also and went another way.

CHAPTER V

During Weston's absence Will Willoughby had directly disobeyed his injunctions in regard to resting. He had himself wheeled to the most shady corner of the veranda and had invited Ethel to bear him company.

Though unwilling to lose time from the dressmaking, she smilingly complied, asking in her most dulcet tones what she could do for his

entertainment.

"Read to me," he replied; adding, "I know that one who can sing with such sweetness and expression must necessarily read well."

So she brought the poet of his selection—

Browning—and took her seat beside him.

With her thoughts engrossed in the sewing and Miss Lovell, she did not at all enter into the spirit of the poem he selected, and she failed utterly in that sympathetic quality which rendered her singing so delightful.

It was a disappointment to her auditor, and ceasing to pay more attention he fell to watch-

ing her beautiful face, and musing.

He was entirely too honest to compliment her on an accomplishment which she did not possess, but he half chid himself for expecting too much. A few questions skilfully put revealed to him the scantiness of her literary attainments; but for this he made ample allowance in his own mind as due to her youth and

her very recent emancipation from school.

Just then Nellie came out with a request from Miss Lovell for Ethel to come and try on a dress; and the latter, inwardly delighted at the summons, excused herself and hastened to occu-

pation more congenial.

Nellie took her place as entertainer of the invalid; but he, feeling disinclined for conversation, requested her to read a selection of her own from the volume. She turned at once to "The Fireside," and had proceeded only a few stanzas when his interest revived; for he recognized now, not merely the external form, but the real soul of poetry.

Her voice was round and full, her intonations perfect; her meaning intelligent. She

read, toward the close,

"'You might have turned and tried a man,
Set him a space to weary and wear,
And prove which suited more your plan,
His best of hope, or his worst despair,
Yet end as he began.'"

"Ah!" he interrupted bitterly, "how many there are of that kind!" She continued,

"'But you spared me this, like the heart you are,
And filled my empty soul at a word—
If two hearts join, there is oft a scar,
They are one and one, with a shadowy third,—
One near is one too far.'"

"One near is one too far,' he repeated slowly. "That is very true. I would not prize

a heart that was not wholly mine, would you, Cousin?"

"I don't know," she answered, laughing. "I suppose we all think that; but is there really such a blissful state as that in which two hearts beat as one?"

"Ah! I see that you have never loved," he

replied, smiling.

"Oh! but you are mistaken. The summer after I left school I fancied myself very much in love."

"Fancied! Love does not fancy, it knows."

"I see," she returned, "you think you have experienced the gentle passion."

He smiled sadly but did not reply. She hastened to add lightly, "I believed myself irretrievably in love, and mama's frowns and commands were as nought, till on one occasion I saw him slightly intoxicated. That circumstance overthrew my idol instantly."

"Sensible girl! You have my unbounded re-

spect," he answered, smiling.

"I flattered myself that I already possessed

that. Shall I read more?"

Then he gave her "Rabbi Ben Ezra" as a test of her poetic intuition, and was pleased with her rendition. She now laid the book aside and they talked about the shaping circumstances of a career, and kindred subjects.

Will was too much interested to be conscious of how much he was becoming physically exhausted, until Weston appeared and unhesitat-

ingly wheeled him off to his room.

"I was just learning how to read," he said

reproachfully.

"That is all very well, but you must not take too long lessons until you are well enough," replied Weston. "I am not surprised that you find Miss Helen so much more intellectual than her sisters, and I venture to say that she is in-

finitely more amiable."

If the Haughton family, with the exception of Nellie, considered it an imperative duty to administer to their wealthy young cousin's entertainment, as well as to his physical comfort, they by no means held themselves responsible for that of his companion, since the latter, they argued, no doubt received ample monetary compensation from the invalid for all his services. Accordingly, they left him to find entertainment in his own fashion.

Marie and Ethel, pursuant to their mother's hint, always, as it were, held him at arm's length; treating him with cold but elaborate courtesy at meals and other formal gatherings of the family, or when meeting casually bestowing upon him a passing remark, somewhat as one might cast broken fragments to a mendicant. But Nellie, whom her mother and two sisters called "too democratic," exerted herself to cover up the lack of cordiality on the part of the others, and bestowed upon him at all times the same free, genial sunshine of her presence as upon the man of wealth.

It is small wonder, then, that each day he be-

came the silent ally and admirer of her unselfish nature.

With regard to Stella—when she appeared at meals or elsewhere in his presence, she rarely spoke to Weston if her aunt or cousins were by; but when he met her roaming around in the lawn or alone on the porches she exhibited a trusting friendliness that was very sweet and grateful to him. Neither he nor she had ever alluded to the lost banjo; but he had ordered a beautiful new one to take its place.

For some unrecognized reasons he still retained the old instrument, which he had locked away from the eyes of prying servants. The new one came a few days after the incident of Dido's death, and Stella, seizing the package before any of the family saw it, bore it wonderingly to her room and opened it in a flutter of expectation; but she was totally unprepared for the delightful surprise that awaited her.

An ecstatic exclamation burst from her lips as, with great care, she lifted it from its case. But when she found it an actual reality, and heard the vast superiority of tone, she hugged it to her heart as if fearing lest in some way it

might elude her grasp.

Oh, days of youthful fervor and enthusiasm! how often, when the gathering years chill our sensibilities and cheapen our possessions, do we look back on the sweet spring-time of life and recall with aching hearts how little it then took to make us happy!

In ineffable delight she ran her fingers over the strings, untuned as they were, but sweeter far than the wood-notes of her feathered friends, or the wind-swept pines—daughter of

nature though she was.

Who the donor might be she could not divine, and she hoped that her aunt might not ask her anything about the package; for if questioned she would be obliged to declare that she did not know whence it came, a statement that she feared her relatives would not credit.

It was therefore with much trepidation that she took her seat at the tea-table, and her very agitation brought about what she most dreaded; for in passing a cup of tea she overturned it, spilling a portion of the contents on the cloth, thereby attracting her aunt's attention and drawing upon herself a disapproving frown.

"By the way, Stella, what was in the package brought you this afternoon," asked that lady,

suddenly.

Thus directly interrogated, Stella was silent for a moment. She looked beseechingly at her aunt with a glance which plainly said, "Please don't ask me." But there was no mercy in the returning glance of those cold eyes.

"Well?" in the same tone, but the girl un-

derstood it to be a command.

"It was a banjo," replied Stella with suffused

cheeks and faltering voice.

"A banjo!" came from three of the ladies, with an intonation of as much surprise as if she had said an *elephant*. It was in vain that she

protested she did not know who had sent it. At last, when Mrs. Haughton said, "Then I cannot allow you to keep it," Stella admitted that it had occurred to her that her cousin and quondam classmate, Tom, might have sent it.

When the subject was dropped it was a relief to Weston, who was glad to let it be believed for the present that Stella's cousin was the donor.

The matter, however, was not entirely dismissed from Mrs. Haughton's mind; for after tea, when they were all upon the portico, she turned to Stella and said,

"Since you have been presented with a banjo, that is presumption strong that you play upon it. Go bring it and let us hear you play."

The diffident girl begged tearfully to be excused, declaring that she could only play a few simple dance-tunes, and those by ear.

"No matter, do the best you are able. It is useless to have an accomplishment unless it be put to some use."

"Do, Stella dear; of course none of us expect you to play like a professional. Forget your audience and play just as if you were out in the woods alone," said Nellie encouragingly; and Stella, moved by the awful fear lest a non-compliance might result in the confiscation of the beloved instrument, went to bring it.

Marie took the occasion of the girl's absence to expatiate upon her country-bred manners and the absurdity of Mr. Hope's method of educating his daughter as if he had intended to make a college professor of her. Weston listened in-

dignantly.

Stella, returning, sat down with the determination to do her very best, and she played her simple repertory with spirit, winning from her aunt the commendation, "Well, something may

be made of you yet."

The next day when she took the banjo to the woods in order to enjoy perfect freedom, she caught sight of a small white object half hidden in the foliage above her head. It was a folded slip of paper, and opening it she eagerly read,

"Please accept the banjo as a poor substitute for your unfortunate pet. With the hope that it may be a source of much pleasure to you, I am "Sincerely your friend,

"WESTON."

CHAPTER VI

"Ethel, go sit with Will while Nellie finishes her breakfast," said Mrs. Haughton several days later; for it had now fallen almost exclusively to her second daughter to fill the post of entertainer to the invalid; for Ethel always pleaded her engagements with Miss Lovell, and Marie pleaded nothing but indifference.

Ethel made a wry face at Nellie, saying in an

undertone,

"Do come as quickly as you can, Nell; I am so

awfully busy."

But the next moment, as she looked at the maimed sufferer, something prompted her to say in a kindly tone,

"How are you, my Cousin, to-day? May I

come and bore you a little with my chatter?"

Her vanity was tickled at the sudden illumination of his face.

"Oh! do come, and the sound of your voice will charm away black melancholy," and he held out his hand in greeting.

"Shall I read to you again this morning?"

"No, I prefer to talk with you awhile. Some other time you may read to me if you will."

She felt a trifle constrained, remembering what Nellie had said concerning her departure.

"Why are you melancholy?" she asked thoughtlessly.

He looked at her a moment in astonishment

ere he asked,

"Do you question why?" and the mounting blood slowly crimsoned his pale cheek. "So far as all the pleasures of life are concerned, and all that makes life worth living, do you not perceive that I had far better be dead than dragging out a maimed, humiliating existence? Is it nothing to remain ever an object of pity—perhaps of contempt?"

This was the first time that she had heard him allude to his misfortune, and as the unconscious pathos of the speaker fell on her unaccustomed ear she was touched in proportion to the shallowness of her nature. She attempted consolation, but in her inexperience, bungled,

and he winced.

"There," he said, "let us never speak of it again. I would not sadden my friends with my personal afflictions. Let us talk of something more pleasant—yourself. You will be here all summer?"

In the face of the direct question and her departure only three days off, she could not deceive him. But she hesitated to such a degree that he said,

"Ah! you are going, then," but not with

quite the desolation she had expected.

Greatly relieved, though piqued, she plunged at once into an animated account of all the glories of belledom at Virginia's far-famed summer resort. "And you will return no longer the unsophisticated maiden, but a full-fledged belle?"

She laughed in a pleased way.

"Oh! I have no such lofty aspirations," she answered in a tone that implied exactly the contrary.

"Is such an aspiration lofty?" he asked

dryly.

"It is, at least, what all girls most ardently desire."

"All the pretty ones, probably."

"Yes, all the pretty ones," she pouted; adding, "It doesn't matter greatly what the ugly ones desire, since they rarely obtain their wishes in that line."

He was tempted to answer impatiently; but restrained himself, and asked,

"What am I to do in your absence?"
"Oh! you will have Nellie and Marie."

"True; I had almost forgotten. Perhaps you will come back with a whole retinue of admirers, or maybe the conquering hero, to ask mama's consent."

"No, sir," gleefully, "I am going this season merely for a good time. And I do not intend for many seasons to come to resign my liberty."

"Perhaps you intend to extend your conquests to the utmost limit, and when there are no more to vanquish, accept matrimony as a dernier resort," he said.

"How naughty of you!" she exclaimed, pout-

ing, but pleased.

"I would like to see you in all your panoply

of war," he remarked.

"Would you, really," she cried delightedly, "then you shall," and that very evening, after tea, she arrayed herself in a very fetching costume and came to the parlor for the encomiums

of the assembled company.

"Ah!" exclaimed Will, in unfeigned admiration, "ribbons and laces will avail more to bring down our sex than all the arms and munitions of Mars. Is it not so, Weston?" and he who had no especial cause for liking the haughty beauty was compelled to give expression to some compliments, for he could not deny, as far as features were concerned, that she was beautiful. These the recipient treated with a half-disdainful, half-pleased condescension which was lost neither upon Will nor his friend.

At this moment the glance of Weston was turned to Stella, and he perceived that she was regarding her cousin with intense admiration. He casually drew near her and asked,

"Do you not think her beautiful?"

"Oh! just too lovely for anything. I wish I were just like her."

With a silent "Heaven forbid!" he simply

asked,

"Why?"

"Because she is so beautiful," clasping her hands ecstatically.

"But beauty isn't everything, is it?"
"No-o, I suppose not, but—but—"

"But what?"

Then Stella, becoming suddenly self-conscious, slipped away behind her dear Nellie.

Ethel was much chagrined that Will's admiration did not keep pace with her increased effulgence; for each time that she reappeared in a new creation his admiration seemed to wane.

Man is an inconsistent animal. Will could not but acknowledge that she was very beautiful, but the demon of suspicion had suggested to his mind that under the fair exterior there were vanity, pride, and worldly ambition, things extremely distasteful to his refined sensibilities.

At last, Ethel, too conscious of her charms to care greatly for the admiration of one so entirely hors de combat as a poor cripple, turned to him and remarked,

"Cousin Will, I perceive that your artistic taste is not satisfied. Tell me the fault and I will have it corrected."

"I find no fault with your costumes," he re-

plied, with unmistakable emphasis.

"Oh! then, it is with myself," and, sweeping him a disdainful curtsy, she turned away without vouchsafing him another glance. She had an intuition of what was passing in his mind, and suspected that the feeling was prompted by jealousy. Her cheek flushed scarlet with anger that he, a maimed creature, should dare charge her with imperfections, or have any thought of her in connection with himself.

"I have been too complaisant toward him,

but he certainly shall not have that to complain of again," she vowed to herself as she put off the gown that she had donned with so much satisfaction.

Thereafter she was cold and distant; neither was there an entire reconciliation before her departure, which occurred some days later.

"I suppose you will look down on your humble admirer here when you return," he said, as

she extended her hand at parting.

"If I see him at all, I suppose I shall have to look down on him," she retorted cruelly, and turned away carelessly, not noticing or caring how deeply the retort wounded him.

Three weeks had passed since Ethel's departure—almost one-half of the period her mother had allotted for her stay—a period which upon the first intimation of such an absence Will would have regarded as almost interminable. But now, looking back, he found it the extremest

folly that he should have so much cared.

The blankest indifference had succeeded to that short-lived penchant; and when her letters would arrive, filled ad nauseam with accounts of her great popularity, he listened with an expression akin to the saturnine, secretly hoping the sojourn of the frivolous and shallow girl might be doubly prolonged. Then he would turn with a sigh of contentment to the smiling face of Nellie, that, if not so beautiful, yet was to him far more attractive.

Stella still passed a good portion of her lei-

sure in her sylvan retreat. One forenoon she had practiced upon her banjo till her fingers were blistered, when with tender care, replacing

it in its case, she exclaimed,

"Oh! how much I would like to be doing something in the way of improving myself! and yet I do not know where to begin. I am afraid I shall never have any more education. Oh! if I just could go off to some fine school and learn everything, how happy I would be."

Taking up a large volume, she continued,

"This is a big book, but I'm going to read

every word of it; then I will read others."

For half an hour she pored over the opening chapter steadily; but at the close she felt far from satisfied with the acquisition of the knowledge she had gained.

"Heigh ho! I suppose if I stick to it long enough, I shall understand it after a while,

and then-"

Her soliloquy was at that moment cut short by a loud bark almost immediately beside her, and being more afraid of dogs than anything else in the world, she sprang to her feet and, in an agony of terror, could only lean faint and motionless against the trunk of the tree.

The huge, barking dog bounded to her, and rearing upon its hind legs placed its shaggy paws one upon each of her shoulders, and with

horrid eyes looked into her face.

CHAPTER VII

Stella's heart gave a great bound of joy and thankfulness as Weston, almost as pale as herself, sprang toward her, and with one welldirected kick sent the brute, yelping, ten paces

away.

"I beg a thousand pardons!" he cried. "I should not have let the dog appear before myself; but there is no harm in him. I hope you are not very much frightened. You were so hidden by the tree that I did not think you here. I am very sorry."

Still trembling, and with cheeks on which the pallor of terror was struggling with the crimson of joyful recognition, she answered pantingly,

"I ought not to have been so much frightened,

but I did not suspect any one near."

"What are you reading?" he inquired, taking up the volume.

"Scott's Napoleon," she answered hesitat-

ingly.

"Humph! how much do you know of previous French history?" he asked, looking at her quizzically.

"Nothing; absolutely nothing since the time

of Cæsar."

"A pretty considerable interval. What do you remember of ancient history?"

She acknowledged she knew very little except

the modicum she had learned from the study of Latin.

"Then," said he kindly, "allow me to remark that you have made an injudicious selection in the present volume. One cannot, without some knowledge of antecedent events, take up to much advantage any isolated portion of history. It would be like the hypothesis of the ancients in regard to the support of the earth: first the shoulders of Atlas, then the tortoise, and then—what?"

She had sunk into the rustic seat and he rested his gun and himself against the tree. Standing thus, he entered into a dissertation upon the best methods of studying history. She listened attentively and thanked him with such devoutness—showing how much in earnest she was—that he was touched. He reproached himself for levity when he saw how undaunted she was by the long list of authorities he had half-teasingly named to her.

"And what else besides history?" she had

asked.

"Nothing else for a while till you go regularly to school, unless you would like to take up French. Do you know anything of the grammar?"

"Not worth speaking of. I have been trying to study it without a teacher, but I don't know

the pronunciation."

"If you will allow me, I will be your instructor while I am here."

She thanked him effusively.

"It is a very useful study for young ladies contemplating going abroad. I suppose you will be wishing to go abroad after you finish school?"

"Oh!"

This was all the answer she made, but she clasped her hands in a sudden passionate gesture of intense desire, while her eyes spoke more eloquently than the gesture.

"Ah! you would like to go, then," and again he looked at her with that same quizzical ex-

pression.

"Like it? I would almost give half my life; but," sadly, "I might as well think of going to the moon."

"Does not your aunt intend sending you off

to boarding-school?"

"No; oh, no, indeed! She is much embarrassed in her affairs, and could scarcely send Ethel."

"Have you no other relative who might?"

"No, I believe not. I have a bachelor uncle, somewhere out in the West if he still lives, but I have not heard from him since my father's death. Aunt Kate calls him a ne'er-do-weel, and I suppose he is, though I dislike to hear my mother's brother thus spoken of."

"Where was he when last heard from?"

"In Portland, Oregon; but that was nearly three years ago, and he was sick and needed money. He may be dead now as we never heard anything afterward."

"Have you his letter?"

"No; I never saw it."

"What was his name?"

"Richard Stockton."

Weston was silent a moment, musing. Then he sprang to his feet.

"Whew! do you know what time it is?" he

asked.

"No; but I hope it is not near dinner-time," she answered with alarm in her voice.

"It is only half an hour! you had better come

at once."

"No, you go; I have to put up my things here.

I will follow in a few seconds."

He went at a rapid stride, and she, hastily putting up writing materials, gathered hat, book and banjo and started off at a run by a shorter route homeward, where she arrived ahead of him.

"Where is Stella?" she heard her aunt ask sharply; and she answered just in the nick of time,

"Here I am, Aunt," and began to slice the tomatoes without a moment's delay, devoutly

thankful to have no questions asked.

Weston found Will on the portico, he and Nellie engaged in a game of backgammon, the invalid apparently as much interested as she. Weston had marveled recently at the change in his friend for the better. There was a perceptible increase of flesh on his hitherto wasted frame, a corresponding gain in strength, while his eyes beamed brightly and there was always now a faint color on his thin cheek.

As Weston paused now to note the improvement, a silent thanksgiving filled his breast, and he stood looking on at the game in unfeigned pleasure.

"Sixes!" cried Nellie gleefully, and she threw off, but leaving a blot in her table. "If you do

not strike me, I win," she laughed.

"Ah! but I intend to strike you," and he threw. "Cinques!" and he promptly placed her "man" upon the bridge. Then a few rapid throws and moves gave him the game.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Weston, walking up and slapping him on the shoulder; and the two friends exchanged glances in which each read

the love of the other.

The next day being Sunday, Marie, Nellie, and Stella went to church in the large old-fashioned carriage, while Weston rode on horseback beside them. Willoughby had insisted that none of them remain at home on his account, declaring Nichols amply capable of looking after his comfort. So they had all gone off in high spirits, Marie handsome and dignified, Nellie pretty and smiling in her new dress, which Miss Lovell, grateful for many little acts of kindness and consideration, had surreptitiously made in her own time, chiefly at night when the family were assembled on the portico. And then came Stella, "rosy as the dawn," in white frock and blue ribbons; looking out ever and anon at the gallant horseman, in her eyes like some valiant knight of old.

There was the usual flutter incident to coun-

try churches when the handsome quartette filed in; and many a country belle directed sly glances toward Weston and Nellie as he took a seat beside her. After the services there followed a few introductions, then the drive homeward, during which a sudden electric storm overtook them.

Nellie insisted on Weston's tying his bridle to the rear of the carriage and coming inside; a request which he, glad to escape a wetting, most readily complied with, taking a seat beside Stella on the front seat. Marie cowered and hid her face at every flash of the vivid lightning, Nellie chatted between the reverberations of the thunder, while Stella, in silent awe, looked out at the swaying of the trees and listened to the roar of the winds, with a feeling divided between fear and delight.

"Any hats or frocks injured?" inquired Will, as, the rain over and the sun once more brightly shining, they came upon the portico where he was enjoying the freshened air, laden with the perfume of many wind-blown, rain-battered

flowers.

"None but Uncle Ben's, I believe," replied Nellie gaily. "He was our scape-goat on this occasion, and I shall make him reparation," a promise in which both Will and Weston begged leave to unite, which sent away the dripping old servant grinning from ear to ear.

It was another of Stella's duties—and one more æsthetic than slicing tomatoes and cucum-

bers—to cull the flowers for the vases in the early morning and arrange them before breakfast. Weston discovered this one morning as he came upon her quite unexpectedly in the rose-garden.

It had been an unusually warm night, and he had arisen early to enjoy the delicious coolness

and fragrance of the dawn.

He saw her before she became aware of his presence, and he paused a moment to contemplate her fresh young beauty before speaking to her. Her brilliant coloring, her graceful movements among the dew-besprinkled roses seemed peculiarly to fit her for the occupation in which she was now engaged; and her loving, almost reverential attitude, as she reluctantly cut them from their stems, suggested Proserpine gathering flowers upon the plain of Enna.

He involuntarily shuddered to think that some day perhaps a grim Pluto, in the shape of mortal lover, might bear away to an uncongenial home this fair sun-loving maiden who now, smiling and blushing, looked up and

greeted him.

"Why, I had no idea that you were such an early bird. You might well pass for one of the 'Rosy Hours,' if you will pardon the mixed metaphor."

"Yes, I gather them while the dew is on them, that they may keep fresh," she answered sim-

ply.

"Let me assist you, as I see the fairest ones

are above your reach, and in drawing them over you bring such a shower of dew upon you."

"That does not matter, I am used to it; besides, I always change my dress before breakfast."

"What, two toilettes in one morning! That is quite a reproach to those who can scarcely make one," he said, thinking of Ethel, and attentively regarding Stella's dress, which he now recognized to be the quaint robe she wore the day he first saw her in the woodland meadow.

"What is your favorite flower?" he asked, to

make her talk.

"I scarcely know, I love them all so well; but I rather think the rose, the white carnation, the lily-of-the-valley, and—"

"All the others," he added, laughing; then,

"Don't you love the heart's-ease?"

"Yes; but I believe I love the wild violet better."

"Why so?"

"Because I feel so sorry for all wild flowers. They have to grow up all by themselves, with no one to look after or care for them. They must—if flowers can feel—lead very lonely lives."

Poor little girl! did she think there was any analogy between her own neglected life and that of the wild flowers? he inwardly asked him-

self. Aloud he said,

"But some do care for them—you and I for instance. Besides, no doubt the wild birds love them and sing to them; the bees and other winged creatures hover around them and fold them-

selves to sleep amid their petals; the sweet breezes whisper wonderful things to them, the sunshine peeps lovingly down upon them; while, on moonlight nights, the little people in green hold their revels among them."

She had listened in beaming delight, and in-

terrupted him to say,

"Oh! I had never thought of all that."

"And don't you think," he continued, "it is far nicer to be wild and sweet in Nature's own way, than to be cultivated into greater beauty, only to be plucked by some careless hand, and then thrown out to be trampled upon, perhaps?"

"Oh! yes, yes; surely," she answered earn-

estly.

"Are you fond of poetry?" he asked.

"I believe I am; but I have read so little."

"If you will allow me, I will select a few short poems for you to commit to memory. I think Burns's 'A Mountain Daisy' very sweet, and if you like I will to-day teach you the meaning and pronunciation of the Scotch words, after I have heard your French; shall I?"

She gave a grateful assent.

"Ah now, how awkward I am! I have stuck a thorn in my finger, just where I can't get at it. Would you mind pulling it out for me?"

"It is broken off short. I am so sorry," pre-

paring to draw it out.

"And then, too, I have no instrument more delicate than a pen-knife. You can pick it out with a pin, or even a hairpin," and he thought

of how Robbie Burns fell in love with his first sweetheart as she picked the brier from his hand in the harvest-field.

She laughed gaily at the suggestion of the

hair-pin.

"You needn't laugh. I read a few days ago of the thousand uses to which a woman can put a hair-pin," and he enumerated a few of the most unlikely.

She drew an immense shell pin from her hair, which now fell in a shower of bright tresses

around her shoulders.

"I have but this one," holding it up. "Now, shall I proceed?" The smile which accompanied the words was just sufficient to display the white and beautifully shaped teeth; and as she raised innocently her dark gray eyes Weston thought he never had seen a more enchanting picture.

"I can do better for you than that," she said;

"I have a needle here in my flower-basket."

"Provident little maiden!" he ejaculated, still regarding her as, in the most matter-of-fact manner, she took hold of his extended hand with her slender dew-moistened fingers and attempted to draw out the thorn.

But Weston proved to be an unruly subject, and by several well-feigned twitches of pain retarded the operation. It was so pleasurable to feel the clinging fingers and to note the expression of concern as she strove to spare him. But when he saw how unsuspicious she was he suffered her to draw the thorn out.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in great relief, "it was the hardest to get out!" and taking up her basket she turned to go.

"Will you not give me one rose to keep?" he

asked.

"Certainly; help yourself," she replied, offering him the basket to choose from.

"But I will prize it more if you will give it to

me yourself."

Searching among the roses, she took up the

most perfect white bud and handed it to him.

"Thank you; I shall treasure it as typical of the giver," and when she was gone, he added, "Sweet human bud! too young to love, but not too young to be loved," and taking out his pocket-book he laid the half-blown rose in it and placed the purse in his breast-pocket.

CHAPTER VIII

That forenoon, when he had heard her French lesson Weston taught Stella how to read "The Mountain Daisy," and also "Lines to a Field Mouse." To his surprise, on the following day she had learned them both perfectly, and recited them with such a simple, pathetic tenderness, devoid of all elocutionary effort, as to make the havoc of the plough-share seem almost a personal calamity.

Her auditor felt a sudden chill, as if it were a premonition of future evil to her, as she recited,

"'But, Mousie, thou art no thy lane
In proving foresight may be vain;
The best-laid plans o' mice and men
Gang aft a-gley,
And leave us naught but grief and pain
For promised joy.'"

The next day, as Weston went through the peach orchard, on his return from the woods, he glanced toward a tree where there were very fine peaches, and saw her perched on a lower limb, while a half-grown colored girl held up a basket that the ripe fruit might be gathered without bruising.

Stella espied Weston at the same moment that he saw her, and in much confusion made a movement to leap down. He hastened to her assistance, but before he could reach her she leaped forward, seized a strong bough and lightly swung herself to the ground.

"Bravo!" he cried, "never saw I feat more

graceful."

"Oh! Mr. Weston, you ought to be ashamed to make fun of my shoes. I put them on only to climb better," and she bent over to hide them.

Weston laughed heartily as he explained, and

she joined him merrily.

"Guess what I have in my pocket for you," he said.

"A young squirrel!" she exclaimed delightedly.

"No; try again."

She made several ineffectual guesses.

"Give me a peach or two and I will show you," and he drew out two young but full-

fledged doves.

"Oh, the darlings!" she exclaimed rapturously, reaching out her hands; and as she received them, warm and confiding, she pressed them lovingly to her cheek.

"I believe you love all dumb things," he re-

marked, pleased at her pleasure.

"Yes, most of them," she replied simply, still caressing the cuddling birds.

"What will you name them?"

"Don't you think Daisy and—and Mousie would do?"

"Do you remember the mythological story of Ceyx and Alcyone?" he asked.

"Not very well. Didn't one of them get torn

in pieces by a lion or fall in the Hellespont and

get drowned?"

"No; you are thinking of Pyramus and Thisbe; or of Hero and Leander. Ceyx and Alcyone were two lovers, and when one got drowned the other leaped into the sea to end a miserable existence, but the deities had compassion on their faithfulness and changed them both into sea birds."

"Oh! yes; I remember now; and because the sea was always calm while they were building their nests on the waves, those were called *Halcyon days*."

"Precisely; so let's name the birds for those

lovers."

"But one of them came to an untimely end,"

she objected.

"No matter; it was restored to life, and they were reunited. It is only a type of the love that shall survive even death," he answered mus-

ingly.

She shivered with youth's instinctive dread of such thoughts, and softly stroking the backs of the doves she said, "Very well, then," and again placed them against her soft, white throat, beneath whose satiny surface the warm blood of buoyant young life was beating in the full tide of perfect health.

To Willoughby, if not to the family at Oaklands, the summer was gliding away delightfully, and almost before they were aware the autumn was drawing rapidly near. As yet, how-

ever, there had been no allusion to their de-

parture.

There was a very perceptible change for the better in Will's condition; and Weston was greatly encouraged as to his ultimate restoration to health, if not to erectness of stature. Supported on his friend's arm, he could, with the aid of a crutch on the other side, walk, stoopingly it is true, several times across the long front porch, while to his erstwhile extreme pallor and emaciation had succeeded both fulness and color, and to the former hollow brightness of his eyes a softer, steadier glow of returning health. Each day revealed more and more what a handsome man he had been before his injuries, and might become again.

He was most warmly grateful for all the kind, cousinly attentions he had received, but it was chiefly to Nellie that he turned for mental refreshment, though now, since his improvement had become so marked, Marie was willing to share with her the entertainment of the invalid.

But it was Nellie who had always been most ready to read, to talk, to play backgammon, and to sing to him—in a voice far inferior to Ethel's, but to the music-loving invalid, very

pleasing.

Weston was still the stoical recipient of much badinage upon the small success of his daily hunting expeditions; but he showed no abatement of zeal. Each day, after a few shots at squirrels, sometimes bringing one home for a stew for Will, he would turn his steps in the direction of Stella's haunt, and there aid her in her studies.

He was much pleased at the almost phenomenal progress she made, and astonished at her

ready intelligence.

He had sometimes observed in her a certain awkwardness of speech or manner when she was in the presence of Mrs. Haughton or Marie; but here, with book in hand, and its contents the subject of discussion, she was a totally different person; and, losing all self-consciousness, she could express herself with a becomingness, and even elegance, which was scarcely credible.

She was now repeating the rules in the French grammar for the direct and indirect regimens of the reflective verb. She began,

"Je m'aime, I love myself, Je t'aime, I love thee"—

At this point a spirit of mischief seized her instructor. She was so unconscious of her inadvertence, so modest, that he could not resist the temptation to tease her a little. When she reached the second person of the verb a twinkle came in his eye, and he said,

"Eh? how is that? Repeat, if you please."

She recommenced,

"Je m'aime, I love myself, Je t'aime, I love thee"—

When, catching herself, she stopped short in sudden embarrassment. Then observing the amused twinkle of his eye, and comprehending the snare into which she had fallen, her face, neck and hands became a vivid crimson, and to

hide her confusion she covered her face with

her hands, unable to utter a word.

When he saw to what extent she was embarrassed he was thoroughly ashamed of himself and hastened to apologize.

"Please do forgive my foolishness; I only meant to tease you a little; I thought you would

only laugh."

She made no reply except to place the open

book before her face.

"Are you offended with me?" he asked in real concern.

No answer.

"Are you? Please tell me," he urged.

"No-o," in a half-stifled voice.

He was about to draw away the book from her face to see if she were laughing, when a great tear splashed down suddenly upon a sheet of exercises in her lap. He was greatly shocked, and very angry with himself; but pretending to think that she was laughing, he went on, in soberest fashion, with a dissertation on the nature of reflective verbs, in order to give her time to recover her composure. Then he jumped to his feet, saying,

"Oh! I had forgotten. I promised Will to return early, to write some letters for him. Just take the next lesson. And—I wouldn't stay too

long here. Good-by," and he was gone.

For some minutes after his departure Stella remained motionless; but within that short space she had formed the resolution to come here no more. She was vexed with Weston, but far more with herself, for being so foolishly embarrassed. In the endeavor to compose herself she lingered too long, and the dinner-bell rang before she had returned. She dreaded the ordeal of dinner, and plead a headache as an

excuse for absenting herself.

That afternoon Mrs. Haughton summoned Stella and proceeded to administer a severe rebuke upon her neglect of duty and her "unfeminine strolling habits," forbidding her from that time forth, under penalty of her severe displeasure, to go outside the limits of the lawn without her express permission. Already wrought up by the incident of the forenoon, this put the finishing touch to the girl's discomfort; and she

was seen no more that day by Weston.

That night, feeling very miserable, she lay down upon her bed, intending to rise after a while and undress for the night; but sleep surprised her, and she slept hours, dreaming that in a haze of mellow splendor she and Weston were wandering over fields of flowers fairer than any known to earth. Hand clasped in hand, she was listening to words musical with immortal love, and his face, as he looked into hers, was radiant with happiness; and though they wandered far, yet was there no sense of fatigue; for her feet seemed treading on buoyant air, and her face was ever turned toward his.

Awakening in the wee, small hours, she came back to earth with a sigh. During her sleep the moon had traversed half the heavens and was sinking toward the western horizon in a pale haze, casting a melancholy light into her win-

dow, which she had left open.

The night had become more chill; and all nature without had such a weird look that, as she reached out to close the blinds, she drew back

shudderingly.

At that instant she thought she heard a scraping noise down beside the back porch over which her window looked. She paused, and listened intently. Surely somebody or something was stealthily moving below, hidden from her view

by the projecting porch.

Soon, to her astonishment, she saw rise above the shingling what appeared to be the ends of two poles a foot apart. A little higher it rose—a transverse piece connecting the two poles—until the letter H was formed. Then Stella's dazed intelligence awoke, and in an instant she comprehended. A burglar was climbing up to her window, of which the blinds were open. Without awakening her aunt, who occupied the adjoining room, she went rapidly but softly in and seized the loaded pistol which always lay on Mrs. Haughton's mantel.

When she regained the window of her room a man was in the act of stepping from the ladder to the roof of the porch. Without a moment's

hesitation she raised the pistol and fired.

CHAPTER IX

As Stella fired, the man swayed a moment, uttered an oath, and disregarding the ladder, sprang to the ground. At the same instant the awakened dogs bounded out from their kennels, and the furious barking, added to the report of the pistol, had the effect of bringing the female portion of the household running in great alarm to their mother's room.

Stella, still grasping the pistol, and trembling with excitement, had just succeeded in lighting the lamp. As Marie beheld the weapon in the girl's hand she cried out,

"Good heavens! Nellie, I believe she has shot

mother."

The effect of this unlikely utterance appeared so ludicrous to Stella that in her agitated state she broke into uncontrollable laughter, almost falling into a chair. Poor Mrs. Haughton, bewildered, sat up in bed, half believing that the girl, in consequence of the berating she had received, had attempted her own life.

It was some moments before Nellie, the coolest of them all, and the most sensible, could extract the facts of the case. When this had been explained, some one was heard knocking at the back door, below stairs. It was Weston, inquiring the cause of the tumult and asking if he

could be of assistance.

On obtaining the enlightenment he sought, he

The ladder was still against the back piazza, and the dogs were in hot pursuit, but now some distance away near the woods. The moon being just ready to sink behind the horizon, he concluded to defer pursuit till the morrow; but at dawn searching parties set out, and found traces of the marauder by a few drops of blood where he had evidently stopped to rest; but beyond that point could discover nothing.

The drops of blood attested the accuracy of Stella's aim, and she was much lauded by Weston and Will for her courage. She declared that she had no intention of trying to kill, but aimed at his arm with the view of frightening

him away.

The general impression was that as Mrs. Haughton had the previous afternoon been paying off some extra workmen and had let be seen a considerable roll of bank bills in her hand, the attempted burglary had been perpetrated by one of these men. No other clue having been obtained, the affair was dropped, and everything settled into the usual quietude.

When for several successive days Stella was not to be seen by Weston at her accustomed haunt, he grew disconcerted, and vehemently blamed himself for his momentary spirit of mischief, resolving to be more circumspect in the

future.

Returning home on the third day, harassed at the turn affairs had taken, he came upon Will and Nellie in the umbrageous seclusion of a side veranda; but they were to all appearances so content with the society of each other, as she

read to him, that he did not intrude.

He repaired to his own room and took up a book, but he could not fix his attention upon it. After reading a few pages he threw it down in disgust, and sauntered out aimlessly on the front portico.

With a dim sense that something was lacking he glanced around in every direction, and a new light came into his eye as he caught sight of a female figure reclining out in the hammock un-

der some shade trees on the lawn.

Thinking it Stella, he was about to hasten to her, when the individual letting a book fall, and rising to recover it, he perceived that it was Marie.

Mentally congratulating himself that he had not intruded upon *her* meditations, he remained upon the portico, walking back and forth. How stale, flat, and unprofitable everything appeared this day!

He now went into the back piazza, and as he approached the end next the dining-room he heard a clatter of dishes, and scarcely conscious of the impulse that prompted the action, he leaned over the railing and looked in.

There, at a side-table, stood Stella. Instantly he felt a new interest in life and his countenance

lost its bored look.

With sleeves rolled up above her dimpled elbows she was engaged in her customary oc-

cupation at this hour, slicing tomatoes and cucumbers. Her whole appearance was as cool and fresh as the appetizing esculent in her hand; and as she stood, unconscious of his presence, he regarded her a few moments without speaking.

An odd comparison came into his mind as he noted the green ribbon confining her loosely tied hair, saw the bright coloring of her cheek, and the pure white of brow, chin and neck.

He did not admire, with the exception of Nellie, this Haughton family. For her he entertained the highest regard. This home atmosphere he considered dwarfing to the growth of all those finer sensibilities which make up the ensemble of a noble soul; and he wondered how Nellie's superior nature could flourish and bloom into womanly healthfulness under such asphyxiating influences.

Perhaps he judged them too severely; but as they had never taken the pains to show him a nobler side of their characters, he was not to be blamed in taking them at their face value.

He was troubled when he considered the influence which such natures might exert on this simple, unaffected child of nature, but he was instantly comforted by the reflection that stronger, nobler souls always assert themselves, no matter what the environment.

At any rate, as he stood there observing her, he was reminded of that luscious melon which thirsty travelers sometimes find amid the arid sands of the parching Sahara; how a seed, inserted by some former provident voyager of this sandy sea into the deep-searching root of the harsh camel's-thorn, soon sprouts into a flourishing vine, producing melons of most delicious quality, gladdening the palate, and bringing renewed life and hope to the weary traveler perishing of thirst.

Thus, in this sterile soil of egotism and mercenary calculation, grew this young maiden, in her fresh bloom and naturalness as soul-refreshing to his vision as the juicy, red melon to the fainting wayfarer of the Great Desert.

"Good morning; how is the headache?" he asked.

She looked up, startled; then smiled brightly, declaring she had never felt better.

"Are you getting hungry?" she asked half-

saucily.

"Yes," he answered, regarding the fine, ripe tomato she had taken up.

"Won't you have this tomato?"

"With thanks. What beauties they are!"

"Stella, what are you idling about? Don't you see dinner will be ready before you have the tomatoes fixed?" asked Mrs. Haughton as she came into the dining-room at this moment. Then seeing Weston, with the tomato in his hand,

"Oh! I perceive. Dinner will soon be ready,

Mr. Weston."

Weston turned away curtly, and Stella, untrained in manners,—as her aunt declared,—blushed crimson at the rudeness of her father's

sister. But the young man was smiling amusedly before he reached the farther end of the piazza; and when he went in to dinner, instead of appearing abashed, as Mrs. Haughton expected, he was smilingly nonchalant as usual.

"This very imperviousness," as Marie styled his imperturbability, was exceedingly exasperating to both mother and daughter; but that two worldly minded women should hold him in less esteem because he gave his services and devotion to a friend in distress, even though it might be partly in consideration of a pecuniary return, weighed not an iota with him; for within a week after his arrival he had fully gauged their characters, and it had been with relief that he saw them bestow all their attentions upon the man of wealth.

The afternoon post brought a letter from Ethel, the contents of which Mrs. Haughton

made known that evening after tea.

"My dear Will," she began. "I have a letter from Ethel, saying she has formed a great friendship with a very elegant and wealthy young lady from New Orleans. Her father does not wish to take his family back there till October; and such being the case, Ethel wishes to invite Miss Roulard to spend the month of September here at Oaklands as some slight acknowledgment of a very pressing invitation to herself to pass the whole of next winter with her friend in New Orleans. But my dear girl hesitates to invite any one here on your account. She fears lest the introduction of a

strange young lady in the house may, in a manner, interfere with your comfort or freedom."

She paused, and as she hoped, he assured her that he would be charmed to make the acquaint-

ance of the young Southerner.

"I see no cause," he added, smiling and gallantly bowing toward his cousins, "why a fifth lovely and charming young lady should in any wise curtail my liberties, comforts, or pleasures."

Mrs. Haughton expressed herself as much gratified. She had already made up her own mind that Miss Roulard should come for she intended to have Ethel accept the invitation to New Orleans. And since her third daughter was to be the retriever of the family fortunes, no stone was to be left unturned to accomplish that high destiny. She continued affably,

"Ethel writes that Miss Roulard is the acknowledged belle of The White. I am sure you will lose your heart, Will, unless you are proof

against the charms of beauty and wit."

It was an unfortunate remark. The recollection of Ethel's rudeness flashed quickly up in his memory, and his cheek colored painfully. Within a few weeks he had become acutely sensitive as to his maimed condition, though he had assiduously endeavored to conceal this under an air of cheerfulness and serenity.

The coupling thus unexpectedly of his crippled disabilities with the gay and sparkling charms of this bright Southern butterfly

brought home to him, in all its bitterness, his

crushing misfortune.

Nellie was intensely thankful that she was in shadow, and that the filling of her eyes could not be seen, as he answered, slowly and sadly,

"It is not for such a battered wreck as my-

self, Cousin, to aspire to woman's favor."

Mrs. Haughton, recognizing too late her

blunder, continued volubly,

"Ethel will be so grateful to you, and I am delighted to afford my children every opportunity to be happy. We can be young but once."

Marie, however, did not appear at that moment to be especially happy. Her mother's unpremeditated truism struck a most inharmonious chord upon that instrument of "a thousand strings" which is supposed to be incased in every human bosom. Her youth, she recognized with sharp pain, was passing all too rapidly, with nothing as yet accomplished.

The keynote of her thought was heard in her

discontented voice as she said,

"I wish, mama, that you would move to town."

Mrs. Haughton made no reply, and the conversation turned upon the question of how a society-loving young favorite of fortune, such as Miss Roulard, could endure for a month the limited resources of entertainment in the country.

The catalogue of rural pleasures, such as tennis and golf, riding, driving, picknicking, and

the like having been exhausted, Stella added yet one more to the list.

"Chinquapins will be about ripe; we can play

'Even and Odd.'"

"I don't know the game," said Weston; "but the name is a suggestive one. Surely, it must be a pleasant thing to get even when the odds are against one."

The next morning Weston intercepted Stella

in the hall.

"When shall I have the pleasure of hearing your lessons again?" he asked.

She blushed, and hesitated painfully as she

replied,

"I don't know. I thought I would drop them

awhile."

"Drop them when you are getting along so famously!" looking at her searchingly, at which she grew more confused, but did not answer. "Ah! I see I offended you the other day, and you have not forgiven me," with a look of sincere self-reproach.

She raised her eyes timidly to make a faint denial and he could not help noticing how pretty

they were.

"If you give up your lessons you will be depriving me of one of my chief pleasures," he said regretfully.

"Then I will continue them," she answered

simply.

For the next week the mansion at Oaklands was the theatre of continuous action; an incessant process of furbishing, renovating, and

turning the best side out, from parlor to attic; while every available piece of silver, cut-glass, china, and bric-a-brac was brought into requisition to produce an effect of opulence and to do

honor to the expected guest.

Resourceful as Nellie was, she now found herself eclipsed by Marie, who showed that when she was sufficiently interested she could be fertile in resource also; for besides the love of ostentation inherent in her nature, she in this projected visit of the fair Southerner saw as "through a glass darkly" some future advantage to herself.

Stella was available only under the immediate supervision of a superior; and when not under orders was able to snatch time for the

preparation and recital of her lessons.

It was impossible for these lessons, these daily meetings of two interesting personalities—both in a measure isolated—to continue without bringing about a condition of sentiment warmer than a casual friendship. Weston, unwilling to acknowledge to himself that he was more than interested in her intellectual development, was yet dimly conscious of a feeling of protecting tenderness which might ripen into love, and if reciprocated might prove dangerous to the equilibrium of her heart as well as his own.

She, on the other hand, was too young, too inexperienced in affairs of the heart to have a true sense of the nature of her regard for him. The sympathy he had shown over the killing of her pet, the gift of the much-prized banjo, his interest in her education had so loosed the shell of her reserve, had caused such a diminution of awe accompanied by an increment of warm human friendship, that there was needed but a spark to kindle love in her innocent bosom.

Already his smile of approval was of more

value to her than anything else in the world.

She could not have rendered a name for this feeling, yet it was devotion under disguise. It was as the perfume of the half-blown rose waiting to bestow its incense on the wooing breeze, all unconscious of its own fragrance. Happy the man who may win for himself and gather into his own bosom all the beauty and richness of such a soul.

Several times Weston had caught himself upon the point of addressing her by some such pet epithet as "M'amie," "Liebchen," or "Mavourneen," checking himself in time, though once he did use "Mavourneen" before he was aware.

"What does Mavourneen mean?" she had asked, and he told her it was a term that the poet Campbell had used in connection with Ireland, and which she would find out when she

should read that poet.

"You have a sweet name," he added. "I am so glad it is one that cannot be mutilated like so many of the present day, such as 'Mai,' or 'Mayme' for Mary; or your 'Fannyes,' 'Rubyes,' and 'Grayces.' I like a name that signifies something. Stella, especially when

combined with *Hope*, has an inspiring sound; and if I were a knight of old and you a ladye fair of the days of chivalry I think I might have gone in quest of noble deeds with a sturdy courage, having 'a star of hope' emblazoned on my shield. Would you have granted me the privilege?''

This was dangerous ground if he did not wish to make love to a girl so young. He recognized it as such and abruptly changed the subject.

"How old are you, Stella?"

"I was fifteen a few weeks ago."

"And did not tell me it was your birthday," reproachfully.

"I was ashamed to tell you," she answered

with touching humility.

"Why so?"

"Because I am so ignorant to be so old."

"So old!" and he laughed at the absurdity. "But you are more advanced in some of your studies than the majority of girls of your age, and besides, you have the capacity to make up for lost time," he added encouragingly.

She looked incredulous, making no answer ex-

cept to ask,

"Shall you continue to hear my lessons after

Cousin Ethel and Miss Roulard come?"

"Why not? I shall certainly continue to hear them as long as you will let me. The arrival of those two young ladies will not affect me." Then he added, looking at her searchingly, but smiling, "They will regard me only as the poor paid companion, unworthy of their notice." She felt to her true heart's core all that was implied, and indignant tears sprang to her eyes as she cried impulsively,

"Were you a thousand times a paid companion, you are in every respect their equal, unless

it be Miss Roulard's wealth."

"Hurrah! here's a friend worth having," exclaimed Weston. Then he asked,

"Why did you imagine I might wish to leave

off the lessons?"

"I don't know. It just came into my head that you might have other things more conveni-

ent or agreeable."

She seemed pleased at the prospect of continuing the recitations. For herself, diffident and reserved in the presence of strangers, she dreaded the arrival of the beautiful visitor as though it portended misfortune to herself. Perhaps, too, there did loom before her a premonition which was to cast a shadow on her young life.

CHAPTER X

"Come," said Nellie, that afternoon, to Marie, Weston and Stella, "let's go down to 'Chinquapin Bottom' and gather some of Stella's treasures."

"Please excuse me, ma chère; I have no fancy for pricking my fingers and spoiling my boots, stumbling through bushes and briers. I will stay here and entertain Will while you are

gone," answered Marie promptly.

"Very well, ma soeur; but see to it that you make a successful job of it," laughed Nellie. But Will appeared not to appreciate Marie's offer of self-sacrifice. His eyes, as they rested on the younger sister, said as plainly as words, "How I wish I could go, too."

"Do you really care to go?" Nellie asked

Weston as he took up his hat.

"Assuredly I do. There is nothing I enjoy more than a ramble in the woods at this season of the year—except the conversation of an agreeable young lady," he replied, bowing low to her.

Stella ran away for a few minutes and re-

turned with a collection of baskets.

"You must be expecting a rich harvest, Stella," said Nellie as the three started off in high spirits.

The walk through the woods was pleasant in the afternoon sunshine. The early autumnal flowers were in bloom along the wayside, and the breezes were blowing with a gentle sough among the tree-tops, showering down prematurely yellowed leaves and imperfect while the dry twigs and dead leaves of preceding autumns crackled with a crisp sound beneath their feet.

Weston and Nellie walked leisurely along, conversing gaily or gravely as their thoughts prompted; but Stella zig-zagged in front, or in the rear, as objects of curiosity—bird, flower, or insect—presented themselves to view. She was as sportive as the squirrels that ever and anon peeped down from some embowered screen upon the trio, or ran behind the boles of the trees and peeped again.

When they had reached "the bottom," Weston was secretly amused as he recognized that just across the little stream was the meadow

where he had first seen Stella.

The latter was gaily running now from bush to bush, shaking down showers of the bright nuts, - as bright as her own hair, - rattling them merrily upon the dead leaves; then, flushed and happy with artless pleasure, she gathered the woodland treasures into an unnecessarily large basket. Returning presently, she exclaimed delightedly,

"Oh! see; I have gathered more than you both together!"

"It is only because you picked out the fullest bushes," answered Weston, teasingly.

"Hark! I hear the sound of wheels," said

Nellie; and she went a few paces nearer the road.

"Halloa!" she shouted in pleased surprise, and signaling a passing carriage she started to run toward it.

Weston and Stella were left together.

"Heigh ho! I'm tired," said he, sitting down and pretending fatigue. "Come here, Miss Stella, and teach me to play that game of Even

and Odd' you spoke of."

"All right. It is very simple," and she proceeded to instruct him. "I am going to win every one you have; for you must not borrow from the 'bank' after your first supply." And, true to her threat, his hat was soon empty, at which she laughed gleefully, unconscious of how very pretty she looked.

"Will you try it over?" she asked.

"No; you are too cruel. You not only break me, but you laugh at my misfortune. That is the way you will treat your lovers, I suppose, when you shall be a grown-up lady, eh? Break their hearts and then laugh at their sufferings."

"I never expect to have a lover," she ans-

wered, blushing and looking down.

"Why not?" he inquired, smiling.

"Because Aunt Catherine is always telling me I will never have the manners of a young

lady."

"Aunt Catherine be hanged!" was on the tip of his tongue, but he restrained himself in time, and asked, "Do you wish to be fashioned exactly after the model of all other young ladies?"

"Yes, of course. One does not like to be odd,

you know."

"That depends wherein the oddity consists.

Whom would you rather imitate?"

"Don't you think Cousin Marie has fine manners? Cousin Kate tells me to watch her, in company, and imitate her."

"Heaven forbid!" was his involuntary ex-

clamation.

She was greatly shocked, and asked deject-

edly,

"Are there, then, finer manners than Cousin Marie's? If so, how can I ever hope to possess them?"

"Yours are a thousand times more pleasing

to me than hers, even now."

A vivid and delighted blush leaped to her cheeks at this declaration; but it was impossible he could be speaking the truth. She hung her head sadly.

"Ah! I know you are only making fun of me. But I will forgive you if you will tell me, as a portion of your instruction, what a grown-up

lady should be."

"I will, according to the generally accepted standard of excellence. First, she should be the embodiment of truth, kindness, and refinement; cultivating to the best of her opportunities, heart, mind, and manners. Her constant endeavor should be to crush out selfishness, and be ready, as occasion many demand, to sacrifice her own pleasures to the general good."

Silence and profound depression followed.

"No one could ever hope to be all that," she

sighed.

"I think I know one who might," he said significantly; and grateful smiles sprang to her lips, while with faltering voice she thanked him for his good opinion of her, declaring that her ambition should be to deserve it.

"Now, since I have given you my ideal of a lady, tell me what should be the attributes of a gentleman, especially if he were your lover."

With all the frankness of an innocent child she opened her lips to speak; paused a moment; bethought herself, and then—as on that other day—face, neck, and hands became crimson.

She was silent; but in the pellucid depths of her clear eyes, as she raised them, he read

something of the truth.

The witching spell of the hour was upon him, and before he had considered what he was doing he had taken her trembling little hand in his, and was saying,

"Will you let me, some day, be your lover?"

She made no attempt at an answer; for the suddenness of it all quite took away her breath. Reared as she had been, in the utmost seclusion, she had been thrown so little in the society of men as to be almost ignorant of the idea of love. To worship unconsciously and have it suddenly

revealed to her that she was loved, was like a

glimpse into Paradise.

So she sat silent, bewildered; almost believing that she was under some strange hallucination; or again in a dream, wandering in those Elysian fields of which she had had a vision.

Weston leaned over and kissed her softly on the forehead, and the action was to her a seal of betrothal as sacred as if it had been wit-

nessed before the tribunals of the world.

The rattle of revolving wheels announced that the carriage was gone and that Nellie would reappear in a moment. From the blue empyrean, to which Stella had ascended, she descended suddenly to the earth; and Weston, shocked at his own indiscretion in speaking such words to a child, in order to shield her agitation stepped quickly forward to meet Nellie.

"You have had quite a lengthy confab," he

remarked easily.

"Yes, a most lucky meeting; two of my best friends—the Rivers girls—returning from The White. They met Miss Roulard and were charmed with her. They will be coming over soon, and I requested them to acquaint all their friends and mine with our guest's arrival." Then, "I am sorry there are no very attractive specimens of the genus homo in the neighborhood, but it is because all the brightest and most enterprising young men have gone to the cities to push their fortunes."

Stella remained in the rear as they now took

up the homeward march, thus escaping any scrutiny or comment. If Nellie had ceased talking a moment to look back she would have seen her young cousin, no longer running hither and thither, but walking slowly, her eyes occasionally raised to heaven in an ecstasy of feeling. To her all nature had suddenly undergone a transformation. As in her dream, she was walking on air, in a new world whose monarch was Love; and even after she entered the house, and went mechanically about her duties, she seemed to be still in a blissful dream; for had he not intimated that some time, somewhere in the future, there should arrive a glorious day, in which sun, moon, and stars should conjoin their auspicious influences to unite forever two rapturous hearts?

Unconscious "that her face shone," she was once more recalled to earth by the sharp voice

of her aunt.

"Stella! what on earth are you dreaming about? Don't you see that you have placed the sugar-bowl where the flowers should be?"

From this moment the lynx eyes of her aunt were fixed scrutinizingly upon her; and when that discerning woman retired for the night she knew, as far as her niece was concerned, the true state of the case. Though she discovered nothing on Weston's side, she was boiling over with indignation; for she entertained no doubt that he was aware of the girl's infatuation, even if he had not encouraged it.

She found it impossible to believe that he

could reciprocate it, because, in spite of his present position and her dislike of what she was pleased to designate his presumption, she could not but admit to herself that he was handsome,

cultured, and gentlemanly.

That he should, under her very roof, dare to encourage such sentiments in the bosom of a silly child angered her to such a degree that she determined to tax him with it the next day, and threaten him with Will's displeasure, if he did not desist immediately.

Accordingly, she invited Weston into the par-

lor next morning.

"Pray be seated," she said icily.

And when, somewhat surprised at her manner, he had taken his seat, she gathered all her weapons of attack and opened the battle.

"Mr. Weston, are you aware what you are

doing?"

"I hope so, truly, Madam," he replied in evi-

dent surprise.

His tone angered her, and she went on sharp-

ly,

"'Are you aware, sir, that that silly girl is beginning to regard you with a very partial eye?"

The brusqueness of the question angered

Weston in turn.

"That is a very delicate subject, Madam, and I prefer not to answer it, if you please," he answered with dignity.

Mrs. Haughton grew impatient.

"I see, sir, that I am not to expect candor

from you; therefore I am compelled to be the more direct myself. I will not ask to what degree you have been culpable, but I must tell you that I desire an end of it at once. It is plain that she has bestowed her silly affections on you. I cannot believe that any one of your age, possessed of moderate intelligence, can see anything to admire in a diffident, awkward, mannerless girl. I therefore most peremptorily forbid, while you remain under my roof, any further notice of her whatever."

Weston had listened with great composure till she paused; then he asked calmly,

"Have you finished, Madam?"

"That depends," she answered tartly.

"Well, then, first of all I must deny the charge that I have sought to encourage any such sentiment as that to which you allude. That your niece is devoid of beauty, intelligence, and other attractions I must also emphatically deny; for I see in her more to admire than some of her relations appear to perceive. So quick, indeed, is her intellect, that I have been taking it upon myself to advise her as to a course of study at home; for I saw her fine capacities running to waste for want of proper cultivation. I saw that her heart was warm—"

"Entirely too warm," sarcastically.

"—but that her life was isolated, through lack of sympathy, and that she was allowed to run wild with companions unsuited to her."

Mrs. Haughton grew red with suppressed

anger.

"Sir, you speak with a free tongue. No doubt you would presume to teach me my duty. But this I have now to say, that unless you will promise me, on your word of honor, to have no more to do with her, I will report the matter to Will, and request him to get another companion. A few days of coldness and avoidance on your part will be all that is necessary; and she will forget you as a child forgets its nurse."

She waited for his reply.

"I shall assuredly never treat her otherwise than kindly. I would not wound her sensibilities for the world," he answered determinedly.

It was in vain that the incensed matron demanded entire renunciation. He would promise nothing else than to treat her as a valued friend in whom he felt a most kindly interest.

"At any rate," she said, rising, "it is my privilege to keep her away from you, and I will see to it that you shall have no opportunity for private speech with her again," and she sailed majestically from the room.

"Poor girl! I am afraid I have made matters worse for you," said Weston to himself as he

went moodily to his room.

His zeal for hunting had slackened much of late, and he now went to Will; but seeing him and Nellie together, and apparently having a good time, he was turning away when he met Marie. She proposed whist, and the four made up a game.

CHAPTER XI

"My precious child, welcome home again," was Mrs. Haughton's greeting to Ethel; and after a kiss and embrace she turned to Miss Roulard.

"And this is the dear friend of whom we have heard so much," kissing the visitor's cheek. Then she passed her on to Marie and Nellie, both of whom welcomed her in the same fashion.

To a guest from more hyperborean regions, this reception might have appeared a trifle forced, but to the warm-hearted child of the South there was nothing exaggerated about it; for in her own home Ethel would have been received in the same hearty fashion.

From the moment of her arrival Miss Roulard was as free and unconstrained as if she had known every member of the family for

years.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed ecstatically, running the length of the portico and peeping around toward the magnificent oak forest, "what a delightful home! Just my ideal of what an old Virginia homestead should be. What stately trees, and what a grand old avenue! Oh! how I wish mère, and père, and Bettine, and Louis were all here to see. I am quite sure père would want to enter at once into negotiations to buy it. But I know, my dear Mrs.

Haughton, the mines of Peru would scarcely

tempt you to part with all this."

"Dear Mrs. Haughton," recognizing in these girlish raptures only the desire of expressing appreciation, with no ultimate design of a bona-fide offer of purchase, replied with effusion,

"No, indeed, my dear. Every inch of my ancestral estate is as loved as—as the recollections that cluster around the hearth-stone."

"Ah! I suppose so; but you must not any of you call me Miss Roulard; call me Marguer-

ite, or Rita, as they do at home."

"I see you are a dear little humming-bird that we shall all want to cage and keep with us," said Marie, putting her arm around the slender waist and drawing her toward the hall. "Come, I know the wings of even a humming-bird must grow tired sometimes; come and refresh yourself before tea."

"Oh! not just yet; I want to tell you all what

a belle your Ethel was."

"Mama, I know you will not take that statement seriously," said Ethel deprecatingly. "There can be but one belle where Miss Roulard is"; but Mrs. Haughton having kissed her youngest daughter for her own sake now added another kiss for the sake of the alleged belledom.

After Rita had followed Marie within, Ethel

continued enthusiastically,

"Dear mama, I had so many invitations showered upon me for the winter. One very wealthy lady from far-away San Francisco, who

has no daughters, but several sons, insists on my making her a six-months' visit this coming winter. What a glorious time I might have but for the lack of a little money."

"Ah! well, my daughter, don't let that worry you now. No one knows what the future may

have in store for you."

"Nellie, why are you so silent?" inquired Ethel, suddenly turning toward her.

"Oh! just because I am so entertained listening, I suppose. Besides, having been nowhere I have nothing to tell."

"I wouldn't be envious," retorted Ethel.
"Envious! Not I, assuredly. I certainly would not have exchanged places with you," replied Nellie, laughing good-humoredly and taking no notice of her younger sister's impertinence.

"Well, old fellow, isn't it time to be donning your dress-suit, as I suppose will now be the order of the day?" said Weston, as he came into Will's room.

For answer the latter smiled a little sadly.

"I had thought to keep my room until you could report on her. If she be à la Ethel, I shall be disposed to remain a recluse till her departure. I can no longer stand pitying glances and honied, heartless phrases. I think I will leave here soon, any way."

Weston was silent, and Will continued,

"It may be that I am more sensitive and despondent than I should be, because my improvement does not keep pace with my desires. But I have now a greater, a more intense aspiration than ever to escape permanent deformity. I have no doubt you have divined the cause?" with a faint blush.

"Yes, my dear friend, and I trust for her sake as well as your own that you may be entirely cured."

"Her sake! You cannot, for an instant, suppose—"

"I am quite sure of it," answered Weston with conviction, throwing his arm affectionately round Will's shoulder.

"Impossible!" cried the latter vehemently, but his face became irradiated.

"Why impossible? Have you not all the qualities of mind and heart best calculated to win a woman's love? I am convinced that even if you should always remain as you are, her supreme joy would be to share that misfortune with you, consoling you with her love."

"Oh, how mistaken you must be!" turning

away his face, to hide his emotion.

"Not I. I have so frequently of late surprised the same earnest, tender look in her eyes when she is regarding you."

"Pity for my misfortune, only," he mur-

mured bitterly.

"No; pity does not call up blushes, nor that look which was 'never yet on land or sea." So cheer up; there is great happiness waiting you in the future." Will grasped Weston's hand fervently, say-

ing slowly,

"If I dared hope so I would leave for Europe to-morrow, and place myself under the treatment of the most famous foreign physicians; and I would never return until I might stand upright among my fellows, and declare my love. Without it I could never accept the sacrifice, not even were I restored to health and strength but left with this crooked spine. Heavens! how blest I might have been but for this."

There was so much of anguish in his gesture and tone that his friend felt in every fibre of

his heart the pity of it.

"You exaggerate your deformity," he said. "If you could have seen yourself at first you might be excused for talking so; but I do assure you, on the honor of a gentleman, that you are absolutely straight in comparison with what you were at first. There is no reason why, if you have improved so much,—and it is mostly since you have been here that I have noted the improvement,—you may not soon be entirely restored."

With such assurances, earnest and sincere, Will was comforted, and his spirits rose to the point of cheerfulness and almost gaiety.

He was seated in his accustomed place when the new guest appeared on the portico, shortly

before tea.

Ethel, mindful of her former rudeness, and hoping much from a prolonged sojourn of the invalid at Oaklands, moved toward him in advance of her friend, greeting him with marked cordiality and expressing great pleasure at his improved appearance. Then she shook hands with Weston graciously, presenting her friend.

Miss Roulard bowed gracefully, and smiled charmingly; and turning toward Will, she said, in her musical Southern voice, with just a soup-

con of tender interest,

"I have heard so much about 'Cousin Will' that I am not content to meet him as an entire

stranger, I must shake hands."

Will took the small hand in his own; and, before be released it he gazed a moment steadily in her eyes in order to discern the sincerity or falsity of these kindly accents. She met the scrutiny calmly, and smiled upon him with the friendliest beam in her soft brown eyes. He was satisfied; and from that moment became her staunch and admiring friend.

She was charmingly lovely as she stood there. Her petite, graceful figure was most becomingly clothed in some soft, sheeny, semi-diaphanous material of creamy tint, that enhanced the dark hair and rich complexion. A single rose was in her hair, and the priceless lace upon her bosom was caught with a cluster of pale pink ones.

She sank into a chair beside the invalid, and was soon, in her pretty, easy style, in an animated discussion with him and Weston as to the relative merits of the four cardinal sections of the United States, as places of residence, calling on first one and then another of her audi-

tors to admit some claim she was making for her Southland.

When Nellie, who had been attending to domestic matters, appeared, Miss Roulard jumped up impulsively from her seat and ran forward to meet her.

"You must come and sit beside me," she said, taking Nellie's hand, and drawing her down by

her.

"I have become acquainted with Marie, but you I have scarcely seen. Why were you not at

The White with us?" she asked.

Nellie, the soul of candor, was about to give the true cause—her mother's financial inability—when she caught an anxious, warning glance from Ethel. Checked in her desire to tell the truth, yet wishing to save her sister's feelings, she hesitated, blushed, and said,

"Mama could not well spare Marie and myself; and I wished to stay at home on Cousin Will's account"—a declaration that sent a thrill of happiness to the bosom of that young

man.

"Stella, you can go now, and change your dress for tea," said her aunt, as the girl, her duties performed, stood leaning against the buffet. Pursuant to her avowed policy, all day long had the determined matron kept her under her eye, employed in some necessary or unnecessary occupation.

To Stella, ignorant of the conversation between Mrs. Haughton and Weston, these domestic duties had been no hardship; and she had been delighted to contribute to the general preparation for the expected guest. While her hands had been busy, happy thoughts had kept her mind engaged. The remembrance of what had occurred the preceding afternoon was now more like some sweet, incomplete dream than a waking reality. Still, one blissful thought dominated her being. He loved her. Of course, she told herself, it would be years and years before she could be worthy of all his love, but she would strive, by study and cultivation, to be worthy finally.

Aroused from her reverie by her aunt's voice she descended from the fair heights of fancy to terra-firma. As she was going, Mrs. Haughton

said to her,

"Don't put on your best dress, but the other; you know which."

"Oh! Aunt Kate, it is so short; please let me

wear my new one; I will be very careful."

"Put on your second-best; and plait your hair in the old way. I do not like the style in which you have been wearing it of late."

"Please, oh! please, Aunt Kate, don't make me wear my hear in those stiff, horrid plaits. It

is so unbecoming."

"Unbecoming! So you are beginning to think about looks! What next? Beaux, perhaps. Go, at once, and dress precisely as I have said, or remain in your room for the evening."

Stella turned away slowly, knowing how vain would be remonstrance or entreaty. She was at a loss to understand Mrs. Haughton's sudden

predilection for stiff, uncompromising plaits. Even he had told her they were unsuited to her style. He would think her careless of his opinion.

Bitter tears sprang to her eyes, and she almost accepted the harsh alternative of remaining in her room. One consideration determined her—she had not had a word with Weston all day and his smile would be a compensation for all disappointments.

Her dress was not so short as she had thought, and she arranged her hair in two loose braids, promising herself to slip the ribbons later, so as to let the ends become unplaited. Accordingly, she descended, not entirely dissat-

isfied.

"Come here, Stella, and help me draw the table cloth a little more to this side; it is not straight," requested her aunt, when Stella made her appearance. Then, when the cloth was arranged, Mrs. Haughton said calmly,

"Now go back, and plait your hair tightly,

just as you used to wear it."

By the time the distressed girl had rearranged the hair as commanded, tea was announced and she heard the chatter of gay voices as the whole party went into the supper-room.

Too diffident to go in alone, and be presented so formally, she ran down to the portico, and sinking into a chair waited, until she heard them returning. Clearing the steps at a bound, she got out just in time to avoid the meeting; and having eaten a silent meal, her aunt dryly said, "Now you may go and meet Ethel and her friend."

To go and be presented, a country-bred girl like herself, to such an exquisitely cultured scion of generations of wealth and refinement as Miss Roulard would be a trying ordeal; but remembering what Weston had said to her, and knowing that he was now looking on, critically perhaps, she summoned courage and went through it with a gratifying composure not unaccompanied by a certain girlish grace. Turning away, after answering becomingly a remark or two, she was seeking her dark corner, when Mrs. Haughton called her to a seat beside herself.

Rita was the center of the whole admiring group, and kept the ball of conversation merrily rolling; laughing, and illuminating her gay sallies with occasional flashes of wit and satire, as brilliant and harmless as sheet lightning.

To listen silently was a new delight to Stella. It was a revelation of what a fascinating woman could be, and it caused her no astonishment nor pang to see Will and Weston leaning toward the bright creature in undisguised admiration.

"My dear Mrs. Haughton," Rita exclaimed, turning toward her, "can you tolerate such audacity? I am positively indignant. Please, Mr. Willoughby, have the goodness to repeat the assertion you made just before Mrs. Haughton came out," and she pouted and tossed her head in affected displeasure.

"Certainly," replied Will, laughing, "and all

the more willingly because I believe Cousin Kate will agree with me. Weston and myself, Cousin Kate, assert that in sentiments of the heart men are the more generous, more willing to ignore social distinctions, more ready, in short, to *immolate* themselves upon the altar of Hymen than women."

"To immolate! There you lose your argument, sir; for when a man recognizes that he has made a sacrifice we may know that 'Sweet Love is slain.' To a woman there is no sacrifice in what she gives up for love's sweet sake.

Marie, Nellie, Ethel—is it not so?"

Marie and Ethel made no decided answer; but discreetly allowed Nellie to be their spokes-

woman. She replied,

"Yes, Rita, your distinction is well made, to which I will add that, so long as the man or the woman possesses the qualities calculated to inspire love, so long will love be requited with love; and there will be no sense of sacrifice whatever."

"Ah! there you are begging the question, which was not what the nobler sort of man or woman would do, or feel under certain circumstances, but what the *majority* of either sex

would do," said Weston.

"Yes, and Mr. Willoughby did our sex the great injustice to assert that under reverses, such as loss of fortune, or caste, and even accidental deformation of person, the majority of us would consider such reverses ample excuse for breaking an engagement. Am I not quoting

you correctly, sir?" and Rita cast upon him a glance from her limpid brown eyes; at the same time lifting a menacing finger.

Will laughingly retorted,

"If Richard were himself again, and able in the event of failure to maintain his original proposition, to beat a precipitate retreat, he might reiterate it; but with such a formidable array of capable opponents against him he will lower his colors for the present. We are all ready to acknowledge that Irving's sketch, 'The Wife,' is a most charming picture, of constancy and devotion under reverse of fortune; but is it, in the majority of cases, true to life?"

"Yes, certainly," answered Rita promptly; but Nellie only murmured in a low tone, "I hope

so, indeed."

Will remarked, "Cousins Marie and Ethel, you are silent; what say you?" to which Ethel

adroitly replied,

"I am too inexperienced in affairs of the heart to be entitled to an opinion. Ask me five years hence."

"Cousin Marie?"

"Well, yes; I suppose it is a true picture."

"Cousin Kate, your verdict."

Stella listened breathless for this answer.

"I should say a wife's place is always by her husband's side, so long as he compels her to no ignominy," she replied.

"Oh! I see you take it with a grain of salt. I did not speak solely of a wife, but of an engaged

person as well. The one should feel almost as much bound as the other. Let's have the opinion

of you all to that."

The answers to this direct question were opposite, but emphatic; Will, Weston, Rita, and Nellie taking the affirmative; Mrs. Haughton, Marie, and Ethel, the negative. Quite unexpectedly to all—no less than to Stella herself, who had been listening silently, yet with a decided opinion, Will turned to her and said,

"Stella, Cousin Kate's broader experience entitles her to a double vote, and we are therefore a hung jury. We will assume that you have had no experience and, consequently, no prejudice. Would you consider an engagement as

binding as the marriage-vow?"

This question turned the eyes of the whole party inquisitively upon her; but though blushing deeply, she answered "Yes" so decidedly that Marie wickedly said,

"Stella may have had more experience than you imagine. There once was, I believe, a cer-

tain Cousin Tom."

"At any rate, the ayes have it; and I move that we all unite in asking Miss Roulard to give us some music. I know you sing, I see it in your face, and have already heard it in your voice.

Will you not oblige us?"

When they had all entered the parlor, the change in Stella's appearance was more noticeable, and she saw the look of disappointment on Weston's face. She was bitterly distressed; but when she looked toward him again he had

turned away and was standing by Rita, prepared to turn her music; but his office was a sinecure. She sang as sings the nightingale,

and with as evident enjoyment.

She used no notes; or, if Weston placed them before her eyes, she did not regard them; she threw back her head, warbling and trilling, shaking out a shower of liquid notes, round and rich. Now they were plaintive, as if lamenting a dead mate, then soaring with the lark to greet the rising sun. Upon the operatic stage, her voice would have made her fortune.

Will—as indeed all her audience—was enchanted; but Stella, enthusiastic in music as in every other beautiful thing, had no words to express her profound delight. She sat apart, thrilled to the heart; but as she noted Weston, bending in admiration toward the fair singer, a sharp pain contracted her heart, and again, as once before, she felt a presage of coming evil.

CHAPTER XII

In a few days Rita, with her gracious manners, had captivated every member of the household; and it was the concensus of opinion that there was neither coquetry nor vanity in her nature. She took a great fancy to Stella, and drew the heart out of the bosom of that shy maiden as no one had ever done before. Compellingly, she also drew her out of her shell in a manner astonishing to the whole family. It was the delight of the girl to sit and listen, entranced, to the music of Rita's voice, charmed into saddened rapture.

Once she had been thrilled by the plaintive melody of "Kathleen Mavourneen," and when

Rita had finished it, Stella softly asked,

"What is the meaning of Mavourneen?"

"It means my darling," replied she, little guessing what a thrill she was sending to the young heart concealed under that silent exterior.

Rarely now had she more than a passing word from Weston—sometimes not for the whole day; and never once since the arrival of Rita had he mentioned the neglected lessons. Her heart ached continually with a vague fear lest, in some unconscious way, she had offended him.

That he must of necessity be compelled to worship Rita she sorrowfully, but unhesitatingly, admitted to herself; but this admission sent no balm to her heart, no forgetfulness of

the words he had whispered to herself.

In all the arrangements which were being made to furnish entertainment for the guest, Will, on account of his disability, and Stella, by her aunt's design, were excluded. Thus, while all of the gay household were away on some excursion of pleasure, these two were thrown much together, and soon became confidential friends.

Will would lead her on to talk of Nellie, whose praises Stella never tired of sounding; while he would entertain her with stories of his own and Weston's frolicsome boyhood, and picture the free life of the West, which delighted her nature-loving soul.

Late one afternoon, on a day when the whole party had been absent on a boating excursion and picnic, Mrs. Haughton, Will, and Stella were sitting on the portico, looking for the return. The latter, glancing frequently down the

long avenue, at length exclaimed,

"Oh! Aunt Kate, look! There they are; such a long line of them."

Mrs. Haughton looked.

"Mercy on us! they are going to give us a

surprise-party."

Truly the approaching cavalcade was a large party, and a surprise of the first magnitude; for there were carriages, buggies, spring-wagons, and equestrians in formidable numbers; such as might well cause dismay to a less energetic and practical housekeeper than the mistress of Oaklands.

The motto of that matron might well have been "Nunquam non parata," and she did not quail now. She was standing calm and smiling on the portico as they arrived—a half-abashed but merry throng.

They trooped apologetically around her, beseeching her not to put herself to any trouble for them, but only to allow them to dance that evening in her grand old hall or sitting-room.

Rita came deprecatingly but smilingly up to

her.

"Dear Mrs. Haughton, you must blame me for it all. When I heard of such a delightfully novel gathering as a surprise-party, I took it

upon myself to propitiate you."

"My dear Miss Roulard, as well as young ladies and gentlemen all, not another word unless you wish to impugn my hospitality. I had intended quite an affair, next week, in Rita's honor, with a regular band of music from town; but since you desire to dance this evening, my house, with all it contains, is entirely at your service. I trust you may one and all enjoy the occasion as much as I shall enjoy having you," and Mrs. Haughton smiled most blandly upon the assembled group.

"Oh! you dear, sweet woman," cried Rita. "I am so glad that we have forestalled you and saved you unnecessary preparation. But you

really must allow us all to help you."

"All the assistance I need, my dear, can be

supplied by my ordinary corps. Do you—every one—go and rest; for I know how tired you must be. Get as much beauty-sleep as possible in the next three hours. Ben will look after the gentlemen."

The whole party, having speedily vanished,

Mrs. Haughton marshaled her forces.

A few moments more, and there was hurrying to and fro in pantry, dining-room, and kitchen; the clatter of pots and pans, the beating of eggs, the pounding of ice; while a fearful slaughter

was raging in the poultry-yard.

Under the directions of the mistress, Stella and Betty, the waitress, were arranging the tables with all the best china, glass and silverware that the establishment afforded. Ben, with several dusky assistants was carrying water and towels to the rooms of the men, and polishing shoes, while others still were removing rugs and polishing the floors.

Nellie was later summoned to superintend the disposing of the Japanese lanterns around the

verandas and grounds.

The energetic chatelaine proved herself equal to the occasion; and last, but not least, she had brought from a considerable distance three very capable musicians. And when, later, these struck up with a popular waltz, there were many exclamations of delight from the girls in the rooms above. Eager débutantes, flushing with anticipated pleasure, tied their sashes with trembling hands, driving pins into their tender

fingers, while impatient feet kept time to the music below.

When the signal was given for descent, each young lady was met at the foot of the broad stairway by her waiting cavalier, and the en-

trance march began.

Light and graceful forms were soon floating through the mazes of the lancers and cotillion, or in each interval between the square dances eager masculine voices were begging the honor of a round dance.

"The Belle of The White Sulphur," as Marie and Ethel took especial pains to denominate Miss Roulard, was besieged with requests for one round dance, till her tablets were full; so that when Weston, who on account of Will had come into the ball-room somewhat late, approached her, she shook her tablets laughingly at him, saying,

"Too late, too late, thou laggard!"

"Please do not say so; remember, there is always room for one more."

"Can you compass the impossible?" smiling

archly.

"Let's see. You have heard of that oriental Society of the Silent, whose motto was 'Speech is silvern, but Silence is golden,' haven't you?"

"Yes; so I must not speak to you to-night. Is that what you would request, as I cannot give

you a waltz?"

"My ambition is not so vaulting. I shall be content with *silver*. But you no doubt remember that when an applicant for admission to that

famed society preferred his request he was silently shown a brimming goblet. What did he do? Did he go away disappointed? By no means. He saw a rose leaf on the ground; and, picking it up, he laid it softly on the brimming water, without spilling a drop, and thus gained admission. Let me be that roseleaf on your tablet."

She laughed merrily at the conceit. Then she

said,

"You deserve one dance for that; but I must be the rose-leaf, if you please; though I would

not like to see you a brimming glass."

While she had been speaking his rapid glance took in the details of her exquisite toilette—pale pink robe and the shimmer of pearls; her starlike eyes, cast down upon her tablets until the long dark lashes swept the delicately tinted cheek, pale in comparison with the rich coral of her lips.

Weston smiled at the mal-appropriateness of alluding to himself as a rose-leaf in the presence

of this peerless, semi-tropical flower.

She looked up, and catching his amused expression he told her the cause. She replied,

"It might not have sounded so ridiculous when your sex were accustomed to wear gay silks, satins, and velvets. Fancy Coeur-de-Lion in bridal attire of silver tissue over pink silk; or the gay Duke of Buckingham in blue silk, closely embroidered in eyelets, from each of which depended a glittering needle. It is the modern man who has departed from the gor-

geous colors that Nature designed for him, to distinguish the stronger, or, shall I say, the superior sex from the weaker?"

"The modern man has had the discrimination to recognize the fact that your sex, through their weakness, have become the stronger; just as St. Paul says, 'When I was weak, then was I strong," "he answered gallantly. But at that moment a waltz was being played, and Rita's

partner claimed her.

It was late before Stella found herself at liberty to dress for the dance. Her choice of a gown was limited by the scantiness of her wardrobe and the suddenness of the invasion; but when she emerged from her room, and encountered Rita and Ethel in the upper hall, the former exclaimed at the transformation in her appearance, and drew her into her own room to add a few graceful touches to coiffure and dress.

"Now go, and enjoy yourself, you dear, sweet thing," said Rita, kissing her on the blushing cheek to which her own kind words had brought the flush, in no wise marring the fresh complexion of the grateful girl, who, too timid to enter the ball-room alone, waited to go down under

the wing of Rita.

The german was not to begin until refreshments had been served, in order to give all those unfamiliar with those figures an opportunity

to enjoy the dances known to them.

Stella had never seen nor taken part in any but the simplest square dances; but she was possessed of much natural grace, and was keenly alive to music and rhythmic motion. She had not for a moment supposed that any one would ask her to dance.

It was, therefore, with as much surprise as delight that immediately on her entrance she received from a youthful swain an invitation to

take part in a cotillion then forming.

She was disposed to decline, but her feet would keep time with the lively music, and ere she could consider how little she knew of the figure, those same feet had borne her irresistibly upon the floor. Weston had punctiliously observed toward her the line of conduct to which he had obligated himself; but he considered it no breach of promise to say to her in passing,

"Now you look like Nature designed," and again presently, "You dance as lightly and as

gracefully as a fairy."

These were simple and commonplace compliments, but for the time rendered her extremely

happy.

The generous and delicious supper having been served, the time for the german arrived. Then Stella looked on with renewed interest, and for the first time in her young life realized the poetry of motion wedded to music. It was exemplified in Weston and Rita, the former handsomer than she had ever seen him, and the latter as beautiful as a houri. But a pain, sharp as thorns, pierced her heart when she saw that lovely form encircled by Weston's arm, and a shadow fell on her young life.

"He loves her," she said to herself, which in her simple code was equivalent to, "They love each other," for, she argued, "Who could be insensible to his perfections?"

There was no more pleasure for her after this; and the youth who had first led her on the floor, now approaching her, found her taciturn

and unresponsive.

Will, up to the present time, had been an interested spectator, and had enjoyed snatches of conversation with Rita and his cousins in the intervals of the dance. Now they were all in the german, and Stella, seeing him look dejected, came, prompted by a similar feeling, to cheer him.

"Were you ever fond of dancing, Cousin Will?" she asked.

"Yes; when I was like other men," he answered gloomily; then, more brightly, "You appear to enjoy it very much yourself, little Cousin."

"Yes, exceedingly; but my knowledge of it is very slight. Don't you think Miss Rita the most beautiful*and angelic creature in the world?"

Will laughed. "I am not quite prepared to say in the world, but she is beautiful and winning. Weston appears to think so, doesn't he?"

If he had wished to slay poor Stella he could not have devised a surer means. A suspicion of Weston's regard for her or of her attachment to him had never entered his mind; and he was now totally unconscious of the cruel stab he was inflicting. She murmured something brokenly and turned away.

At this moment Mrs. Haughton sent a message to know whether Will wished to take a hand at whist; but, pleading fatigue, he retired to his room.

Left alone, Stella, striving to conquer the pain gnawing at her heart, and to be alone, wandered out to a secluded spot upon the lanternlighted lawn. There she sat down in a rustic seat, and leaned her head against the rough bark of a tree and gave way to her anguish in a dull, dumb fashion. No sentiment of jealousy toward Rita or of reproach toward Weston found entrance to her bosom. As sometimes happens, in the case of young and enthusiastic natures, her devotion to these persons was limitless and sublimated. She saw in both all the qualities best calculated to arouse sentiments of admiration and love.

The difference of her regard for each was a mystery to herself, and she could not have explained it in words. As her love knew no limit, so it recognized no difference on account of sex; she only knew that to augment the happiness of either she would willingly sacrifice forever her own. For the happiness of each in the other, doubly would she be willing. Only, when she might behold that happiness complete in wedded love, she would wish to claim for herself the privilege of the wounded doe—retirement to some lonely covert where she might lie down

and die, content to pass away, unnoticed and unlamented.

Heedless now of all things external, she sat, her dress limp and damp from the heavy dews, until the sound of approaching voices aroused her attention. She drew back into the shadows as two men came near. One of them was saying,

"Isn't that Miss Roulard a stunner?"

"Yes, as bewitching as Circe. I am sorry for

that fellow Weston."

"Shot through and through. But I am of the opinion that she likes him about as well as he likes her."

"Pshaw!" answered the other voice, "you never can tell anything about these society girls. They generally are only after the scalps to hang at their belts. Of course, she is an arrant coquette, and would take a man's heart out of his bosom with as little compunction as that Roman fellow struck down the tallest poppies in his garden."

"Yes," replied the first voice, "it is the almighty dollar they are all after. I understand

Weston is as poor as a church mouse."

By this time the men had passed beyond Stella's hearing, and, rising, she sought her own room, in no wise relieved of her anguish by the insinuation that Rita was only playing with Weston. If he had really fallen a victim to her charms, as she could not reasonably doubt, the requital of his love would cause herself less sorrow than to see his heart breaking for another.

After long tossing she slept at last. In the

early hours before the dawn she heard the sound of wheels, the sound gradually dying away in the distance. Then she turned her face to the wall with a moan such as a bereaved bosom gives utterance to when the preceding day has seen consigned to the tomb all that was most dear.

CHAPTER XIII

Late in the afternoon of the following day, as Uncle Ben was seen approaching with the mailbag, Rita claimed the privilege of distributing the mail, and came back with the bag in high glee.

"Ah!" said Will, "we understand why you wish to distribute the letters yourself—some disconsolate swain pouring out his lamenta-

tions."

She only laughed, without denial of the

charge.

"One for you, Ethel; one for Cousin Will, another for Ethel—always a favorite of fortune; one for Mrs. Haughton; none for Marie, Nellie, Mr. Weston, Stella or myself. Well, that is provoking. I had set my heart on at least six. I do not envy Mrs. Haughton her letter, because after her magnificent success of last night she deserves a dozen. Well, read away; Nellie and I will walk down the avenue to wear off the keen edge of our disappointment."

While the others are busy reading their letters we will glance over Mrs. Haughton's

shoulder as she reads hers.

"Portland, Oregon, Sept. 11th, 189-.

"Dear Mrs. Haughton:

"No doubt you will be much surprised, at this late day, to receive a communication from one

whom you have every reason to suppose dead, or worse.

"For years I have lived the life of a rover, until within a comparatively short period, in which I have succeeded in scraping together a little gold dust. This last I wish to put to some good use before I have a chance to scatter it again. I know that when I left my native State I had a little niece, the only child of my sister. After her father's death I learned incidentally that she had been committed to your care. I do not suppose she inherited much of this world's goods, as her father was almost as careless of his affairs as myself; but I loved him as well as I did my sister; and now, even at the eleventh hour, I wish to do something for their daughter.

"If she has not the means to procure the advantages of such an education as I know her father desired for her, I wish you to draw upon me, from time to time, for such sums as may be

necessary for this purpose.

"Please place her at the very best school that you know of, and send me all the bills. As you will need money in advance, I enclose cheque for an amount sufficient to cover the expenses of the first session.

"Present to my niece—Stella, I believe is her name—my affectionate regards; and for yourself and family accept my assurances of friendly esteem.

"Very sincerely yours,
"RICHARD STOCKTON."

Mrs. Haughton was very seldom thrown off her guard, nor was she now. She made no remark, but folding the letter quietly, placed it, with the enclosed cheque, carefully in her pocket, unobservant of the interested glance that one of the company present, from time to time, as she read, cast upon her.

Not to any member of her family did she allude to the contents of the letter until everything was quiet for the night. Then she entered Marie's room, and the two discussed all the advantages that might accrue from Mr. Stockton's

generosity.

At the same time another conversation was taking place in the room shared together by Rita and Ethel.

Rita had just said something very complimentary of Weston, declaring him one of the most attractive men she had met during the entire summer. Thereupon, Ethel had taken it upon herself to deprecate him, and to inform her friend that he was merely Will's paid companion, and as such unworthy of notice from a lady of social station.

Rita had defended him warmly, the more so as Ethel, piqued at his scant attention to herself beyond what politeness absolutely required,

attempted to detract from his real merits.

"He is, at any rate—paid companion or not a perfect gentleman, and as such entitled to the consideration of every lady. As to his being poor, that may be an accident for which he is not responsible. None of us is proof against reverse of fortune," answered Rita with anima-

tion bordering upon zeal.

"If you allow him to go on so openly as he has been doing of late, in his natural but very presumptuous admiration of you, everybody will doubt whether you were such a belle at The

White as I have affirmed," replied Ethel.

"Let them doubt," answered Rita scornfully. "Thank Heaven I never desired especially to be a belle; certainly, not so ardently as to sacrifice any delicacy of feeling, or courtesy to one who, in every respect except money, perhaps, is your or my equal. I know the hall-marks of a gentleman as well as any one—having, I presume, seen as many—and I am not obliged to model my conduct toward one of them according to the narrow ideas of others who would frown down a true gentleman, or lady of breeding and education who happens to make an honest living in a way not entirely conformable to certain antiquated ideas of aristocratic occupations."

Rita had rushed on impulsively and almost indignantly through this rejoinder, until now she paused quite breathless and almost in tears.

"Mercy on me!" cried Ethel, recognizing that she had gone too far, and fearing lest Rita should take serious offense at her words, "Mercy on me! I had no idea of calling down wrath upon my devoted head. Cannot you allow me to air a little old Virginia prejudice in the form of pleasantry, without offending? There, invite Mr. Weston to visit you in your own home if you will; I have no more to say."

"Certainly I shall invite him, if he comes to New Orleans, to call. I know mère and père would both be delighted to meet him, even though he now be paid for his services. I scarcely suppose any one would expect him to give up several years, perhaps, of his time, and pay all his expenses, in order to remain with an invalid friend, unless he were a Crœsus."

At this point Ethel grew conciliatory, and Rita being of a very forgiving nature, after a little more talk and the renewal of amicable relations, they fell asleep in peaceful serenity.

So when the next evening Weston was bending over Rita in an attitude almost devotional as she sat at the piano, she smiled archly at Ethel, and the latter replied with a slight shrug of one shoulder, as much as to say, "Chacun à son gout."

"Don't you sing, Mr. Weston? I really never

thought to ask you," said Rita, smiling.

"Oh! about as melodiously as a frog beside a pond," he declared, laughing.

"He does sing; and quite delightfully—for a man," said Will, who had heard the question.

"Don't pay any attention to him; he would, if he could hear nothing better, think 'Katy-did, Katy-didn't' a most delightful aria. I wonder he has not died of pure ecstasy in listening to you and Miss Ethel," laughed Weston.

It was in vain that he disclaimed and asked to be excused. In her pretty, coaxing way she in-

sisted till he felt constrained to yield.

"You ought to sing one song, just to show

which one of you is telling the truth," she declared.

"And you will never more ask me to sing another?"

"Never, nevermore—if you do not sing well," she laughed.

"Well, upon that promise I will comply if you will allow me my own selection; will you?"

"Assuredly."

"Then give me the notes of 'Marguerite,'" he said, and all joined in the laugh. But Rita, notwithstanding that the joke was against her, laughed also, and rummaged in the music until she found the song.

"Shall I play the accompaniment, or do you also play, Admiral Crichton?" she asked with

color slightly heightened.

"I will play it myself, please, as I am to give it my own expression," and he took the offered seat.

He played a short prelude, and sang, throwing, for very mischief, all the feeling he was master of into both words and music; and if he did not touch the heart of her to whom he sang, he stirred to the very depths of her soul one who listened to every word with the most intense attention; but when he reached the lines,

"But oh! the thought you'll not be mine Will break my heart, Marguerite,"

Stella thrilled with sharpest agony both for herself and Weston; for a doubt never crossed her

mind that he was not singing to this Marguerite in most earnest, passionate appeal.

Rita's visit was fast drawing to a close. Not one in all the household, cold and selfish as some of them were, but were genuinely distressed to see her go. Especially Will and Weston would miss her; and for them there was no guaranty that they would ever behold her again.

After Stella had retired for the night she heard Rita's voice down below in the parlor

singing,

"'Oh! hast thou forgotten this day we must sever?
Oh! hast thou forgotten this day we must part?
It may be for years, and it may be forever,—
Then why art thou silent, thou voice of my heart?"

The pathos of the words, into which the sweet singer had thrown such expression as she only could render, struck on the writhing listener's soul like the voice of doom; and burying her face in her pillow, to stifle her sobs, she wept till she fell asleep, and even then her breath came and went in convulsive gasps.

CHAPTER XIV

"My dear Rita, you have given us all so much pleasure by this visit that nothing will satisfy us but a repetition of it next summer. Tell your mother how very unwilling we were to comply with her wishes in recalling you," said Mrs. Haughton, holding both hands of the parting guest as they all stood on the portico to bid her

good-by.

"My dear Madam—and all of you who have made my visit so delightful—let me declare that I will never die happy till I have had that pleasure again. And I shall expect my dear Ethel on the very first day of December, to remain till after Mardi Gras, at the very latest. How I wish, Marie, and Nellie, that both of you were going, too. Cousin Will, and Mr. Weston, if you ever dare come to New Orleans without previously notifying me, I will immediately erase your names from the list of my friends. Stella! where is Stella? I must say good-by to the dear girl."

"Stella will accompany you as far as L——. She leaves for school this morning," answered

Mrs. Haughton quietly.

There was an exclamation from Will and Weston—the latter turning away for a moment to conceal his deep indignation, while Rita said, "Indeed! Well, I am truly glad to have her

with me for at least a portion of the way. I love her dearly."

After a few more "last words" she said,

"But really and truly, I must now tear myself away, or I shall be left. One more kiss

around and then good-by indeed."

"Do you include me in 'the one more kiss all around?" asked Will, smiling, after she had kissed the four ladies. "I claim the privilege of a cousin. There is nothing in empty titles."

"I am more than half inclined to," she answered, laughing, as she laid her hand in his and wished him entire recovery and much future happiness. Will, really affected at her departure, raised the hand silently to his lips and

kissed it fervently.

"Stella, Stella! come quickly; Rita is waiting," called Mrs. Haughton in the hall; and the next moment the young girl, closely veiled to hide her tear-swollen face, came out and stood silently. Then, unable to control her voice, she shook hands as silently with Will and Weston, raised her veil just sufficiently to kiss the female members of the family, and followed Rita down the steps and into the carriage.

Weston assisted them in, and as he released Stella's hand from a pressure in which he wished to convey much significance, he said,

"Good-by, Miss Stella; I hope you will make good use of your time; and, in the course of a few years, return—a very accomplished young lady."

Nellie, always impulsive, ran down to the car-

riage just as Uncle Ben was about to drive off, and after giving Rita another kiss, threw both arms around Stella's neck, and whispered,

"Good-by, my dear girl; I will write you frequently, and give you all the news"—a promise which was as balm to the bleeding young heart.

Rita, who had experienced the pangs of homesickness, endeavored to cheer her with gay chat-

ter, but only half succeeded.

The young exile's heart quivered and palpitated with a strangely terrified dread as she stood upon the railway platform and heard the hoarse whistle of the approaching locomotive. She had small experience of travel, and as now the fierce onward rush of the engine was heard, it seemed like some huge mythical monster, breathing fire and smoke, rushing down upon her to snatch her away forever from all she loved.

Weston remained out of doors, walking about the lawn until the carriage turned the corner of the avenue, and then he went straight to his room. He felt too indignant to admit of his even glancing toward Mrs. Haughton without betraying the deep displeasure for the unjust, yes, even cruel manner in which she had acted throughout this whole affair.

The scheme had been so deliberately planned, so heartlessly executed; and had, no doubt, brought as much pain to Stella as to himself, for that she reciprocated his regard as sincerely as was possible for a girl of her age, he felt con-

vinced; and in his own heart he knew that her

image would be cherished.

He could not know what the future might bring forth, but he had determined to wait patiently until her education should be finished,

and then to ask her to marry him.

He believed that she would develop into a noble, charming woman, once her extreme reserve and shyness had been polished away by the transforming hand of culture. Her modesty, so different from the loud-voiced boldness of so many young girls he had seen, was to him an added attraction.

"What must she think of me?" he asked himself many times that day and night; and in view of the fact that he had made to her no explanation whatever of his abrupt change of demeanor, he could not but feel persuaded that she would hold him a trifler with her affections, and a traitor, unless he explained at once.

So poignantly did this consideration weigh upon him that he sat down the next day and wrote very freely to her, addressing the letter to the care of the Mother Superior of the convent to which she had been consigned. Not for a single day longer was he willing that she should entertain such an unworthy opinion of him, and he hastened earnestly to set her aright.

He had given Mrs. Haughton a promise to be nothing more than the most casual acquaintance to Stella while he remained under the Haughton roof. The promise had extended no farther; and now, since she herself had taken the initia-

tive against the happiness of the young girl, he was justified in counterplotting for the restoration of her peace of mind. It behooved him

to defend himself from unjust judgment.

Accordingly, he wrote at considerable length vindicating his position and explaining the motive which had for its object her own personal freedom and serenity of mind. He counseled her to put aside, while at school, all thought of him except as of a disinterested friend, in order that she might give her mind undividedly to her studies. He assured her that in the meanwhile he would ever hold in the highest regard her sweet young personality, and that at what future time soever he might hear she was emancipated from convent-walls and was her own mistress, he would seek her out, were it at the other side of the world. He declared that he by no means desired to trammel her affections; he preferred rather to wait until her heart and judgment might be in accord, for, unless he might be found worthy of both, he would rather yield her to a worthier lover than have her suffer the consequences of a misplaced regard. He would, for several years, leave all to the shaping hand of the destiny which regulates human affairs, trusting always that the girlish interest she now entertained for him would strengthen with maturer years, and on renewal of their acquaintance ripen into the beautiful blossom of love.

He begged of her a speedy reply, and ac-

quainted her with the fact that Will was think-

ing of going to Europe.

It was only through Will and Nellie that Weston was able to secure Stella's proper address, for Mrs. Haughton and the other members of the family were reticent upon the subject. Having obtained it, he went himself to the station

and posted the letter.

Thus far he flattered himself that he had countervailed Mrs. Haughton, little suspecting that that lady had already, in a letter committed to Stella for delivery, warned the Mother Superior against attempts of a certain Mr. Weston, or any other young man, to establish a correspondence between himself and her niece. She straitly charged the Mother Superior to either burn such letters immediately on receipt or to transmit them to Mrs. Haughton herself for answer.

Thus it came to pass that within three days after Stella's arrival, and before any adequate estimate of her character could be formed, the letter of Weston fell, in due course of regulations, into the hands of the wise Mother and was

carefully read and considered by her.

The whole tone of the letter made a favorable impression on the pious woman's mind; and she debated within herself which option she would take, transmit the letter to Mrs. Haughton or burn it. It was a little repugnant to her to expose to the cold scrutiny of unfavorable eyes a letter of that sort, and she suspected from the tone of that lady's letter that she was heartless

and calculating. Besides, there was, deep down in her own heart, unacknowledged to herself, a spot sacred to young lovers; for Sister Maria Agnes Josepha had been a tender-hearted woman before she had been Mother Superior of a convent; and ere she had become the Bride of Heaven, and had sought divine consolation, had loved a mortal youth, whose untimely death had turned her own soul heavenward.

It was, therefore, with pity for the sorrow and disappointment her rigorous but strictly conventional act might occasion, that she dropped the letter into the glowing grate; for it never occurred to her even remotely to deliver the missive contrary to the injunction of the girl's aunt and protectress. But she wrote a kind letter to Weston, telling him what she had done, and requesting him to refrain from all attempts at correspondence so strictly forbidden, while Stella should remain a student within the walls of Santa Maria of the Doves.

Weston waited anxiously for a reply from Stella, which never came; neither came the letter of the Mother Superior—lost to him, we may not say exactly how, but lost irrecoverably; and so, after two weeks, Will quite unexpectedly announced his almost immediate departure for Europe. A few days later the two friends sailed, bound for the Old World, where Will went to place himself in the hands of the most skilled medical experts.

Frequently as Weston, alone at night, walked the deck of the steamer, he pondered with pain upon the cause of Stella's silence, never suspecting the truth, but always fearing lest her heart had been so sorely wounded by his apparent neglect and recalcitrancy as to be resentful and unforgiving.

CHAPTER XV

A change from a state almost as free and untrammeled as that of Indian maiden roaming with her wild tribe over plains and mountains had within the space of one short week come to Stella—a change so great that at times she was inclined to believe herself the victim of a strange hallucination, and that she would awake some morning to find her dream dispelled and herself back at Oaklands, living her former unrestricted life. But as time passed and some of the novelty wore off she began to realize the stubborn fact that henceforth for a term of years, whose limit she did not know, she was to be a quasi-prisoner; to have no will of her own, not even in so small a matter as receiving or answering a letter which had not passed the censorship of the stern Mother Superior; nay, not even to choose a ribbon for her hair of a color not prescribed by her or her aides.

Mrs. Haughton had wisely left it to the Mother and the Sisters to arrange for her niece the course of study which they should deem best suited to her advancement and capacities. They were surprised at her attainments in some directions and more so at her deficiency in

others.

Thanks to Nellie's thorough but somewhat limited instructions in music, she was able to take an excellent start in technique, and after the half term to begin vocalization. It was in French and history that she showed most brilliantly, because, having been started in those branches by Weston, they were her favorites.

She was at first too much engrossed in her studies to make many friends; and it was not until she had become used to other girls that she was regarded with any favor by them; for girls, in a certain way, are more heartless, or shall we say more conventional, more unreasonably exclusive, less magnanimous, more easily swayed by trivialities and prejudices than boys. Such slight accidents as an awkward manner, a provincialism in speech, or even the unfashionable cut of a collar, may cause them to shun or even affront a fellow-pupil.

But Stella, having a good share of natural vim and much character hidden under that shrinking exterior, lived down all adverse criticism, and steadily progressed toward the front

ranks.

The letters of Nellie, every month, kept her informed of occurrences at Oaklands, and were as oases in a desert of study and discipline.

From Nellie's first letter she had learned of Will's abrupt decision to go abroad for a protracted season, to place himself under treatment; "—and," continued the writer, "in consequence of their departure, the house wherein mirth and gaiety have so lately reigned is now as silent as the Cave of Trophonius. The family spirits may be described as blue, bluer, bluest. Mama's and mine are blue, Marie's are

ultra-marine, and Ethel's are indigo. The cause in the latter case is that E. is anticipating disappointment in her proposed visit to New Orleans, since the purse of a certain Fortunatus is closed."

Then in her own humorous style, in order to cheer the heart of the lonely girl, she detailed all the neighborhood news, and finally assured her that she was taking the very best care of "Ceyx and Alcyone," at which intelligence

Stella's eyes brimmed with grateful tears.

Affairs at Oaklands remained pretty much as Nellie had described them, through the autumn and winter. Mrs. Haughton, as she phrased it, "raking and scraping" every penny she could collect to equip Ethel for the visit to New Orleans; and the latter, never so happy as when leaving home, had gone away early in December, while Marie, in much disgust at being compelled to pass the whole winter at Oaklands, moped and sulked from day to day.

Nellie, with a vague blank in her own usually contented bosom, made pickles and preserves, looked after the poultry, took solitary walks to banish painful thoughts, and cheered her mother's heart by infusing into it some of her

own home-made sunshine.

Then came letters from Ethel, letters glowing with happiness, which served to accentuate Marie's discontent; descriptions of balls, boxparties, and other entertainments ad infinitum. Never had a guest been so royally fêted. It was

"all more like an enchanted dream than reality." Afterward came Mardi-Gras,—all too soon,—with the Rex, and Comus balls, and the request that she be permitted to remain to the mi-carême ball; she had "a special object" which she would explain on her return and then she would be willing to leave "dear old New Orleans."

At last early in April she came, never wearying of reciting the pleasures of her visit.

"And,—after all,—what?" asked her mother significantly.

Then swelling with pride, but blushingly,

Ethel answered,

"There was one whom I never mentioned in my letters, because I was not sure of his intentions until the evening before I left."

"And what of him?"

"A brilliant parti, mama. He is an Anglo-Mexican of noble Castilian descent on the paternal side; of the most polished manners, very handsome person, distingué, an eligible, even according to your standard, mama."

"And now comes the supreme question, how much?" inquired Nellie, smilingly, as she

divined what was in the family mind.

"The only son, and heir to a gold-mine,"

answered Ethel proudly.

"Mirabile! only—son—and—heir—to a gold-mine. He must have an ore-hard heart, and be an inorganic sort of a fellow," laughed Nellie, teasingly. Ethel flushed hotly.

"I said nothing of his disposition or his temperament. I do not understand your insinuations," said she loftily.

Nellie good-naturedly explained.

"Go on, my dear; don't let Nellie's nonsense

annoy you," said her mother.

"I have nothing more to say, mama, except that he wishes your permission to meet me as his fiancée, next summer, at The White."

"How jealous Marie and myself must feel!" exclaimed Nellie in mock chagrin. "We shall have to dance sans souliers at your wedding."

"Speak for yourself, please," snapped Marie.

"How long will he let you wait, Ethel?"

And the youngest daughter of the house, with the air of a queen who has provinces to bestow, replied with becoming hauteur,

"That is for me to appoint. I suppose no one will dispute my prerogative in such a mat-

ter."

"Well, ma chère, all I have to say is, goldfish require a deal of angling for, and even when caught are sometimes very slippery. Delays are dangerous," remarked Marie.

"At any rate, I shall enjoy my liberty one more season at The White, if dear mama can give it to me," looking anxiously at her parent.

"Impossible, child; utterly impossible, with an expensive trousseau in prospect. He must see you at your home."

"Oh! mama, I could so easily reimburse you

afterward."

"Certainly, as the daughter-in law of a goldmine, it would appear so," put in Nellie. Mrs. Haughton pooh-poohed the idea of another season at The White, declaring that her daughters must suppose *her* the possessor of a gold-mine. Ethel's countenance fell visibly,

and Marie remarked prudently,

"I think, Ethel, it will be a rather dangerous pleasure, however gratifying to your amourpropre, to parade such a prize, even as your fiancé, at such a place, There are too many fair and fond doves that would not scruple to snap up a gold-bug if it came within their reach."

But the young beauty, confident in her charms, with a sniff, and a toss of her head, replied,

"Let them attempt it! I am not afraid."

Some weeks later, Ethel opened the question

again.

"Mama, I have just received a letter from Rita. Suppose now you might be able to rent your home, with the privilege of the stables, garden, poultry-yard, and servants' attention, for the months of July, August, and September; would you be willing to do so, and go visiting for the summer?"

Mrs. Haughton looked up in surprise, and then replied prudently—that it would depend largely upon the amount of rent offered, and asked if she knew of any one wishing to rent

Oaklands.

"Nothing positive as yet, mama; but you know Mrs. Roulard is an invalid, and does not like a fashionable watering-place for herself

and the younger children. Rita has been expatiating so eloquently on our Eden of a country-place, that her mother is just crazy to come here with the two children for the hot months. But she feels a great delicacy in making an offer for the place, as she knows nothing of your financial embarrassments, and thinks us wealthy. She once or twice remarked to me that she would be delighted to rent some rather quiet country-place in Virginia, near us, where the children could have all the benefits of a healthful climate, exercise, freedom, pure milk, good water and all that. And whenever Rita would go into raptures over Oaklands. Mr. Roulard would laughingly declare he would either have to buy, or rent it, to content her."

"Well, child, that is a question involving some consideration. An apparently liberal rent might be very far from reimbursing me for giving up my home and turning my family out of doors for three months. Then, the crops might be neglected and many things might be injured during my absence. How about the

boy?"

"Oh! he is a veritable book-worm; as quiet as a girl; never cares to budge from his chair, if he can get a book to read. The physicians declare he will never be strong until he can be induced to live more in the open air and take more vigorous exercise. Mrs. Roulard thinks riding horseback, boating, swimming, and the like will be the making of him. Hence the great desire for Oaklands."

Ethel paused for her mother to reply, but that prudent calculator was silent. She pon-

dered awhile before she finally said,

"Perhaps, my dear, it is not such a bad idea; but I do not see how I could ask such a rent as would be sufficient to maintain all my family so expensively for the summer; you and Marie at The White, and Nellie and myself somewhere, I suppose. What says Marie? for I know that you and she have planned it all to suit yourselves."

Ethel blushed guiltily, but sprang up to call Marie; and to judge from the promptitude with which the latter appeared she could not have been either unprepared nor far off when the

case had been laid before her mother.

"Mama," she said, "Mr. Roulard would never think of offering you less than would be required to board his family and several servants at an expensive summer resort. You could scarcely get more if you were to rent the place for a whole year."

"A little more, perhaps; but go on."

"Well, then, to take up the more important personages first—for several years you have been wishing to get away from home for a much-needed rest and change. This arrangement will let you accept Aunt Henderson's long-standing invitation. We have sounded Nellie on the subject, and she prefers to go with you. It is superfluous to say that Ethel and myself prefer the Mecca of all Virginia girls. Ethel ardently desires one more season there

before entering the estate of matrimony, and I shall go with the avowed intention of seeking to end my single-blessedness," argued Marie.

"And you think that with the opportunities of one more season you can promise me a son-

in-law?"

"My word upon it; or, failing that, to renounce the pomps and vanities of fashionable life."

"With no more murmurings of discontent?"
"No; my hand and seal thereto," laughing.

- "Good! that is certainly an end to be desired. What next? Oh! two trousseaux later on; though I suppose if you secure the husband you will be indifferent to the meagerness of the bridal outfit."
- "Well, not entirely. I should desire for my mother's eldest daughter, a suitable equipment for married life."
- "We will now summon Nellie to the family councils," said Mrs. Haughton. Accordingly she came, and the proposition with all the *pros* and *cons* was stated.
- "I scarcely see that the arrangements are perfect," she said emphatically, seeing how little would be left for herself and mother.

Marie and Ethel stared at her aghast, Marie

saying,

"Surely, Nellie, you are not going back on

your agreement?"

"Not if I can avoid it," she answered goodhumoredly; "but you must remember that mama and myself, though possibly angels in embryo, have not yet received our wings; and until we are plumed for upward flight we shall need some means like other earthly mortals. I have heard of angel's food, and angels are generally represented with some kind of attire. Under the present arrangement we would be compelled to flap our pinions rather laboriously in such hot weather to reach Chicago. Yet, if we could only receive them in time, they might also serve for raiment, though that would depend on size, cut, and texture. Perhaps we might order then en tablier, en pannier, or both combined," rattled on Nellie, without pause for her sisters to slip in a word.

"Nellie, you are the most nonsensical and unsympathetic of creatures. Let us leave her out,

mama."

"By no means; for her remarks contain

grains of sound sense, my dears."

After much discussion it was arranged that if Mr. Roulard would pay a sufficient sum to warrant it, Marie and Ethel were to have their hearts' desire, while Mrs. Haughton and Nellie were to visit the Henderson relatives, near Chicago.

"Oh!" cried Nellie suddenly, "we have left

out Stella, altogether, in our calculations."

"True, there is a check," observed Mrs. Haughton, while Marie and Ethel looked blank.

"Oh, bother!" exclaimed the latter vehemently, "why is mama always to be hampered with such an uninteresting protegée?

"Why not leave her at the convent till the next session?" asked Marie.

"And pay as much for her board as for

yours?" asked her mother, petulantly.

"It need not come out of your pocket, mama. Her Uncle Stockton wishes her to have every advantage; surely, that would be one," urged Marie.

"To yourself, certainly," retorted Nellie.

"You are aware that though he made a very liberal allowance for expenses, it is now all gone," answered Mrs. Haughton.

"Perhaps you and Ethel think it will be better to make a nun of her, Marie," exclaimed

Nellie indignantly.

"She might as well be," answered Ethel, with

a significant shrug of her shoulders.

"Is marrying a *gold-mine* the supreme ambition of every woman?" asked Nellie scornfully.

"If so, then I am sorry for some I know," re-

torted the younger sister pertly.

"Silence!" commanded Mrs. Haughton sternly. "I will arrange this matter to-day, myself." And being a shrewd business-woman, she lost no time in unnecessary delay. That her communications were precisely to the point was evidenced by the fact that within ten days the whole thing was definitely and satisfactorily settled.

CHAPTER XVI

Mrs. Haughton waited only long enough to extend a cordial welcome to the Roulard family; to surrender the keys into their keeping; to make them acquainted with the mansion and its environs; and to witness the intense delight of the children, coupled with the graver pleasure of the parents, before she and Nellie turned their faces Chicago-ward, as Marie and Ethel had already turned theirs toward The White Sulphur. Stella remained at the convent.

The mother and daughter were received with affection and gracious hospitality by the Henderson family, which consisted of the mother, two daughters, and a son. Nellie was soon as intimate with the girls as with her own sisters; more so, in point of fact, because they were more similar in character and, therefore, more congenial. The son, engaged in business in the city, was a year or two older than herself. residence was a few miles out of the city, delightfully situated, and each twilight, after Alfred's return from the stifling heat of town, the four would wander along the Lake shore, the fresh breezes and the plashing of the waves a charming accompaniment to the animated conversation.

Sometimes, however, Nellie would drop pensively behind; and gazing far over the waters, her thoughts would traverse a broader main,

seeking, in fancy, a perhaps melancholy man vainly searching for health amid the Old-World

haunts of invalidism and pleasure.

Why was it, she sadly mused, that no tidings had come of the wanderers? She augured ill from that unbroken silence; for if Will had found returning health would he not have informed his relatives of the cheering fact? Had he not, very often when they had been so much together, expressed his appreciation of their kindness?

Several times Alfred had surprised her in these wistful speculations, and would rally her thereon. Then she would rouse herself, banish serious thought, and with humorous or ridiculous explanation join so merrily in the chatter as to allay his half-jealous suspicions.

Did she envy her sisters their gayer pleasures? By no means. Each day she felicitated herself more and more upon her choice; even when their rather infrequent letters came, gushing with raptures over their social

triumphs.

Ethel had mentioned her fiancé's arrival, and glowed with pride at the mutual admiration existing between Marie and himself. She dilated upon the flutter his coming had created among maneuvering mamas and marriageable daughters; especially, when the whispered rumors of his great expectations were circulated among them. Marie wrote also of Señor Mora's distinguished manners and handsome person; asserting that Ethel was the envy of half the

young women at the Springs. The Señor had taken herself into his confidence, and had endeavored to engage her sisterly offices in procuring Ethel's consent to an early marriage; that Ethel was obdurate, and Señor Mora impatiently bore the declaration that she would not be married in less than a year.

Mrs. Haughton and Nellie consulted together, and came to the determination that Ethel was to be allowed to set her own time for her marriage, in spite of Marie's insistence that the

period of engagement be shortened.

Accordingly, they both wrote to Ethel, advising her to consult only her own inclinations in such a momentous matter; and Nellie added,

"We are not so desirous of giving you up, little Sis, as to advise a precipitate marriage. If Señor Mora, who you say is thirty-four, has delayed matrimony so long, and then is not willing to wait just one year for so beautiful a bride, I should break the engagement, sine Mora, and send him about his business," which pun Ethel repeated in answer to the urgency of that gentleman, saying, "Dear old Nellie! she always veils sound sense under some ridiculous form."

Señor Mora frowned and glared at every new admirer of his betrothed, and turned moodily away, muttering imprecations under his magnificent black moustache.

Marie, too, was having a good time. An absence of one summer had not entirely obliterated her from the remembrance of former

friends; for, selfish and unresponsive as she was at home, she could, as we have said, be charming when she thought it worth while.

She had not yet, however, announced her own engagement; but what did that matter? She had still several weeks in which to exercise her powers of fascination. She argued that the world and all things therein were created in six days, and in triple that space surely she might make a matrimonial engagement.

Then, ten days later, came a letter stating that in one more week they were to leave for the visit to their cousin in West Virginia. Señor Mora would accompany them a part of the way, en route for Mexico, to look after his property.

It was more than a week before the next letter arrived. Nellie opened it, to read aloud, at her mother's request, and to their amazement it ran as follows:

" 'Dearest Mama and Nellie:

"'Prepare yourselves for a great shock, which I scarcely yet know how to accept myself, or to break to you. But as you will wish to know all the details, I will write them as concisely as I can, although I am hardly able to write coherently.

"On the appointed day we left The White for our visit to Cousin Laura Wynne's, Señor Mora to accompany us a portion of the way. For several days he had ceased his importunities for an early marriage, seeming more resigned to the delay.

"When the time came for Marie and myself

to get off, he gathered up my traps and conducted me to the platform. Cousin Harry Wynne was waiting for us, and, as soon as I appeared, he rushed up and began talking so fast that I scarcely had time to say a word of farewell to Mr. Mora before the train started

again.

"'I turned to say something to Marie, but she was nowhere to be seen. Cousin Harry and I then went into the waiting-room thinking she had only preceded us but she was not there. Of course we then thought she had failed through absence of mind—though not like her—to get off, but would stop at the next station and return on the up-trip. We telegraphed to her, and waited; but the answer came from the agent that no lady of that name had gotten off the train there.

"We then went on to Cousin Laura's, who met me with open arms, but was troubled about Marie. In the afternoon Harry went back to the station, and returned, bringing not Marie, but the enclosed. Read it and judge of my feelings, if it is possible for any one except the victim of such duplicity—""

At this point Nellie dropped Ethel's letter

and opened the one enclosed.

"Read," said Mrs. Haughton hoarsely; and, all in a tremble, Nellie continued:

"'My dearest sister,

"Can you ever forgive me for the wrong I have done you? Believe me, I did not enter into it designedly; but, rather, the force of cir-

cumstances has brought it about. If I thought you entertained any real affection for Mr. Mora I would have cut off my right hand rather than

do this thing.

"At first I thought only to console him for your coldness, for which he appeared very grateful. Then he began to show more and more pleasure in my society, and delicately to hint that it was unfortunate for him that he had not met me first; that he was afraid he had made a mistake in urging one so young and giddy to become his wife.

"'I know I should not have listened, but I had promised dear mama a son-in-law. We will be married before this reaches you. Please break it gently to mama and Nellie. I hope and pray it may be no great blow to you, but rather

a relief, for you do not love him, and I do.

"'I will write to dear mama as soon as I reach his father's hacienda in Mexico. In the meanwhile, I am, with the fondest love for you, mama, and Nellie, your devoted, if erring sister, "'Marie.'"

For a few moments no word seemed sufficiently expressive to break the silence. Then with a deep groan Mrs. Haughton dropped her head in her hands. 'Oh! the shame and heartlessness of it! To rob her young sister of her promised husband, and then lay the blame upon her mother! As if I had exacted any inviolable promise of a son-in-law. And my poor wronged child, far away from us, among strangers, deso-

late in her great sorrow," and deep sobs shook the maternal bosom.

Nellie was deeply affected at the mortification which she knew Ethel must be suffering, and at the reproaches which a censorious public would heap upon Marie's dishonorable and unsisterly conduct; she also felt deeply for her mother's distress, but, when the latter spoke of her youngest daughter as "desolate in her great sorrow," she could scarcely repress a smile as she said.

"Mama, I don't think you need distress yourself greatly at the thought of Ethel's sorrow, for I am quite sure her heart was never very much interested in the matter. It is Marie's conduct that should most affect us. Let us read the remainder of Ethel's letter, which you have

forgotten," and she resumed,
"After I had read Marie's letter I was so overcome with shame and mortification that I came very near fainting. Cousin Laura saw my agitation and ran to my assistance. would have preferred to keep the matter secret, but it was impossible. I could only point to the letter, which she read with great indignation.

"Then she took me tenderly to her bosom, and tried to comfort me. She told me I ought not to sorrow over the loss of such a manrather to rejoice that I was delivered from such a perfidious wretch. She asked me if I had really loved him as a woman ought to love the man she intended to marry; and, dearest mama, upon looking into the depths of my heart, I failed to find Mr. Mora's image engraven there."

"Thank God!" murmured Mrs. Haughton.

"'It was only a girlish infatuation and an ambition to make a brilliant marriage. Cousin Laura asked me if I had been reputed wealthy in New Orleans, and I was compelled to confess with shame that such was the impression and that I had made no effort to correct it. Then she said the man was no doubt a furtune-hunter, and that Marie was the one to be pitied. Now, mother, I am persuaded from the manner in which he urged haste, that he feared lest the rich prize might slip from his grasp, and married Marie to secure it."

The remainder of Ethel's letter dealt in strictures on Marie's unsisterly conduct and in vehement declarations that she would never forgive her. She bewailed the scandal that must ensue, and finally concluded with the wish to join her mother and "dear Nellie, who never would have treated me so."

"There, mama, I told you Ethel's affections have sustained no great injury. I think with Cousin Laura Wynne, that poor Marie is the one to be commiserated. So try to bear it bravely and let no one here know of the occurrence unless they see it in the newspapers. I think, like Ethel, we should keep the matter quiet."

And in due time Ethel came, looking paler and more serious than her wont; and none but her mother and sister was the wiser till long afterward.

When several weeks had passed and no tidings came from the fugitive pair,—no marriage certificate,—Mrs. Haughton began to be tortured by a most horrible anxiety. What if the Señor, descended from the treacherous Spaniard, had deceived her too-confiding daughter, and there had been no marriage after all, or only a mock ceremony?

In silent agony she writhed under this new fear, not venturing to communicate it to the two sisters, but striving to conceal from them the burden of sorrow which pressed so heavily

upon her heart.

In this season of solitary struggle and stern repression she realized for the first time her failure to instil into the minds of her daughters the higher principles and aims of a noble womanhood, and that she had only held up to their view the empty baubles of a merely worldly ambition.

Now, when disgrace stared her in the face, she became so much more softened that Nellie and Ethel often found themselves wondering

over her unwonted gentleness.

At last, after painful waiting, came a letter, postmarked San Francisco; and as Mrs. Haughton tore it open with hands that were pitiably trembling, the long-hoped-for certificate fell into her lap. A feeling of deeper thank-

fulness than she had ever experienced caused her to utter a fervent thanksgiving, and she fell to weeping almost hysterically. Her daughters were shocked at her emotion; but when, brokenly, she was able to tell her recent fears, they were still more so; and they united with her in the most devout expressions of gratitude.

The purport of Mrs. Mora's letter may be briefly given. It was to the effect that she had been duly married at Bristol, Tennessee; and, but for the fact of having supplanted her sister, and married without her mother's blessing, she would be perfectly happy. That her husband was everything a husband should be; that they were then at the finest hotel in San Francisco, but later he would take her to his father's home near the City of Mexico; but, for some months to come, he had important interests to look after in California and Arizona.

Enclosed was a short letter from Señor Mora, saying that it should be the aim of his life to atone for his one fault, by striving, in every way under the sun, to make his wife happy, and to surround her with the luxuries to which she had been accustomed. He begged the family to condone the offense which had been of the head and not of the heart. That from the first moment he had seen Marie he had known that Fate had designed them for each other, and that they had taken the easiest way out of a very delicate position; that he had promised his wife, if agreeable to her family, to take her back on a visit to her native State the following

summer, at which time he would be delighted to make the acquaintance of the mother and other daughter, with both of whom he could not fail to be charmed if they at all resembled the two representatives with whom he had the

honor to be acquainted.

"Well," exclaimed Mrs. Haughton, when both letters had been read, "I must confess that I am infinitely relieved; for matters might have been worse. His style is exceedingly gentlemanly, and I suppose of course that it was his great love for Marie which led him to do a thing that is at least not without parallel. We will write them to-day. Will you not add a few lines of forgiveness, Ethel, my dear?"

"Most assuredly not, mama; for though I am now rejoiced that Marie married him instead of myself, I am not quite so ready to condone the offense," as he appears to expect. I shall never regard it in any other light than as base and dishonorable," and she turned

away with a flush of deep resentment.

CHAPTER XVII

The summer and first month of autumn have passed, and once more Mrs. Haughton and her two remaining daughters are standing on the portico of their home, while Mrs. Roulard and children are ready for migration to Magnolia-

Land. She is saying,

"Dear Mrs. Haughton, how can I ever thank you sufficiently for giving over to me for such a length of time your perfectly delightful home? When I look upon my dear boy and see the flush of health upon his cheek, and his listlessness transformed into animation, my whole heart is filled with gratitude. I myself feel like a different creature, and Bettine has become a real country-girl. Words cannot express how much I owe you."

And the happy mother, sincere in her expressions of gratitude, takes an affectionate leave of the family and is borne away in the rumbling old carriage to the station, often with a mother's fond pride looking at the healthful figure of Louis, riding horse-back beside them. Mr. Roulard and Rita are to join them at L—and return with them southward, while the Haughtons settle down for an indefinite period

of domestication.

And how fares it with Stella Hope, who for a whole year has been plodding along at her studies? For her—with only the one aim of progress—the time has passed so uneventfully that but for the whistling of the autumn breezes and the falling of the sere and yellow leaves she could not be convinced that a year had passed and that she is by so much the nearer to the goal of her ambition. One day has been so nearly the counterpart of another that she can only measure time by the progress she has made in her studies.

The kind Sisters, learning that she desires to be self-supporting, have given her every aid in their power; and thus in this uninterrupted year of close and intelligent application she has accomplished the work of two ordinary sessions. Now, at the beginning of the second year, she takes her stand, pari passu, with the juniors.

Three more months glide by, and at the expiration of a year and a quarter since she left Oaklands she is again there for the Christmas

holidays.

The invitations of the family have been sufficiently cordial; and, all former injustice and coldness forgotten, her heart swells with emotion as she drives up the familiar avenue and catches the first glimpse of the mansion that, whether hospitable or not, had sheltered her orphaned head.

As she approaches she glances through a gap in the avenue and views on the edge of the forest her sturdy old giant still bending protectingly over the seat she had nearly three years before ingeniously improvised; and she laughs softly to herself as with clearer, more mature vision she looks back upon that period, still recent in actual measurement of time, but remote

in comparison with the change in herself.

Very soon, all fluttering with joy, she is in the old hall receiving salutations and words of welcome. She has heard of the marriage of Marie and is prepared to find one face missing from the family group. There is no change perceptible in the other members of the family, except a gratifying increase of cordiality, especially on the part of Ethel.

The change in herself appears marvelous.

"Why, how pretty you have grown, child," was Mrs. Haughton's salutation, and being a worshiper of beauty, she forthwith begins to feel a greater interest in her niece than she had ever felt before. It did not require long for each member of the family to note how conspicuously she had gained in self-poise, in dignity of deportment, and in conversational powers; while from constant association with cultured instructors and ambitious students, all her former crudities and little eccentricities had disappeared and her manners had become polished and easy.

She was catechised and examined to the extent of the abilities of her interlocutors, and her progress found eminently satisfactory; so much so that Mrs. Haughton felt constrained to write to the Mother Superior and express her gratification at the unexpected advancement of

her niece. Especially was Nellie delighted with Stella's progress in music, since she had given her her start.

Even Ethel condescended to compliment, and remarked to her mother, later, "I believe some-

thing may be made of her, after all."

Every familiar thing on the plantation came in for a share of the young girl's notice and petting. Ceyx and Alcyone were cuddled back to a seeming recollection of her, while the dogs,

cats, and horses were fondled.

She visited her old haunt under the great oak, now standing as desolate amid the winter snows as she herself had stood that sad morning when she had been torn from the family circle and exiled among strangers; when she had been cut off from even one little farewell word with him who held her heart in his keeping—one who had since been renounced, by his own defection, and deposed from the pedestal on which she had placed him. She had banished the thought of him by persistent and intense application to study, and had determinedly erected a mound of forgetfulness above that young love that had been no fickle, sportive Cupid, but an infant Titan, that sometimes even yet turned and writhed under the superimposed masses of the Ossa and Pelion of determination and suppression.

After remaining two weeks at Oaklands she returned to the Convent, resuming her studies

more assiduously than ever.

Winter and spring pass slowly to the family

at Oaklands; but May brings some revival of interest in the shape of a letter from Marie announcing that "dear Jose" and herself are desirous of visiting her family, and if convenient to them will come on about the first of June; that her husband is so impatient to become acquainted with her mother and Nellie, and she herself is pining for a sight of the old homestead; that Mr. Mora has not yet been able to take her to his father's home on account of business engagements, but that for some months they have been at a ranch in New Mexico. She is not well, but hopes the climate of Virginia will benefit her.

The three women look a trifle serious over the contents of this letter, especially the intelligence that Mr. Mora has never taken her to his father's family in his palatial home near the City of Mexico. Mrs. Haughton shakes her head doubtfully, and deep in Nellie's mind a silent suspicion finds lodgment.

In due course of time the pair arrived, but do what they might to render the home-coming pleasant and unconstrained the situation was

awkward and embarrassing.

Mrs. Haughton and Nellie were exceptionally cordial to Marie, who looked worn and ill. The latter presented her husband as "dear Jose," but though that gentleman went through the presentation with an assumption of ease, he was far from feeling it.

Ethel had not advanced with the empressement of her mother and sister, but stood

slightly aloof, calm and cold. As Marie turned toward her and saw the expression of her whole attitude, she stopped short, blushing crimson, and cast a deprecating glance upon the sister whom she had wronged, waiting for her to take the initiative in deciding their future relations.

Ethel paused uncertainly, wavering between two powerful, conflicting emotions; then yielding to the more generous impulse, she stepped forward and clasped her sister in her arms. Marie was not prepared for such magnanimity, and broke down sobbing upon Ethel's shoulder.

Encouraged by the warmth of the greeting bestowed upon his wife the Señor now advanced; and, holding out his hand, with a

sickly attempt at pleasantry, asked,

"Am I not included in the general amnesty?"
The wronged girl drew herself up, and an-

swered contemptuously,

"Most assuredly, sir, not only are you fully pardoned, but I consider myself your life-long debtor."

After his first attempt to carry off the whole affair with bravado, in which he recognized that he had signally failed, Marie's husband was ill at ease; and in his whole manner there was something so furtive and indefinably unpleasant that neither Mrs. Haughton nor Nellie was favorably impressed; the latter frequently murmuring, "Poor Marie!"

She remarked to Ethel, later,

"He always has the appearance of taking an inventory of all mama's possessions."

"Do you think Marie is happy?" asked

Ethel.

"No, I am sorry to say I do not. She makes a great effort to appear so, but she has faded so decidedly that I am sure she has had many trying experiences. I believe him to be nothing but an unprincipled adventurer."

A few days later, the Señor requested Mrs. Haughton to favor him with a private interview. Much wondering, she accompanied him to the parlor, and being seated, he without

preamble plunged at once in medias res.

"Madam," he said, "I have requested this interview because I contemplate leaving tomorrow, and I would like, before going, to have all business matters settled. I have a most excellent opportunity to invest my wife's portion of her father's estate, and desire to know whether it now stands in her own name, or if there has yet been a division."

He paused for her reply, but Mrs. Haughton, astounded at his impudent demand, could only stare at him in amazement. At length she said,

"I fear I have not understood you. To

what estate do you refer?"

"To her late father's estate, Madam, of course. I did not know that there were others," he replied, himself surprised.

Mrs. Haughton, by an effort, pulled herself

together. Then she answered very slowly,

"Her late father's estate was nil, sir. The

property, which in ante-bellum days was considerable, was all mine; and what is left of it will still remain mine."

"Am I then to infer, Madam, that my wife has no property in her own exclusive right?"

he asked in evident alarm.

"Nothing whatever at present, and very little in prospect. My estate—the sad remnant of it—is heavily mortgaged, and my sources of revenue are limited."

His face darkened with disappointment and

anger.

"Then I am to understand that the great Haughton wealth consists in so many castles in Spain?" he asked satirically.

Mrs. Haughton's indignation could be re-

strained no longer. She sharply retorted,

"Yes, sir; if Ethel enjoyed in New Orleans the reputation of wealth, it certainly consisted in castles in Spain; and I have not now the shadow of a doubt that your gold mines in Mexico lie very contiguous to your wife's chateaux in Spain. May I inquire, Señor Mora, in what your worldly possessions consist?"

"Then we have all labored under a most lamentable mistake, Madam. I have no property, either in Mexico, or elsewhere. I am a Mexican only in name. I passed the earlier portion of my life in New Mexico upon the ranch of an Englishman. I have quite a wealthy relative of my name near the City of Mexico who has a son and heir of his own. The reputed wealth is his, not mine."

Mrs. Haughton sat silent a few seconds, too aghast at this revelation to be capable of immediate speech. Then she asked,

"What then do you propose to do with my

daughter?"

Mr. Mora attempted a facetious reply.

"I was expecting your assistance, my dear Madam, in overriding my present financial difficulties. It remains for you to say what is to be done with her."

"Good Heavens! does Marie suspect the true

state of your affairs?"

"I am inclined to believe she does, seeing we have been compelled to make shift to arrive at the present time; and her amiable reproaches have not been the most efficient lubricant in making the wheels of fortune turn smoothly. In short, Madam, she has made it so disagreeable for me in bewailing the privations to which she declares she has been subjected that we both deem it expedient to leave her for a while in the bosom of her family—at any rate till I can find more lucrative employment, and one more congenial to my lady."

"In other words, sir, you propose to desert

her indefinitely, I presume."

"Say rather, she proposes to desert me for

a period."

"To cut the matter short, it all amounts to one and the same thing; you are unable to support your wife, and have brought her back to her mother," said Mrs. Haughton.

"Let us say, rather, that I have brought her

to visit her relatives for a season; it sounds much better that way," he answered coolly.

Accusations and recriminations the outraged

Accusations and recriminations the outraged lady regarded as worse than useless. Without another word she cut short the conference, leaving her hopeful son-in-law, and going to communicate to Nellie the deplorable future of her

eldest daughter.

Practically a deserted wife, penniless, and with the not distant prospect of maternity, her life blasted by an unhallowed act of perfidy, it looked far from cheering for Marie. Truly, retribution had overtaken her swiftly; and the ambitious, calculating mother wept bitterly over the marred fortunes of her eldest-born.

Nellie strove bravely to comfort her by picturing a brighter side; but Mrs. Haughton declared there was no brighter side, and con-

tinued her lamentations.

Marie's husband left the next day; and the whole family remained during the summer quietly at home to cheer her in her forlorn con-

dition, which she felt very keenly.

Mr. Mora wrote occasionally, but made no reference to improved finances, nor hinted at reunion; and when at last, in September, he was made acquainted with the birth of a daughter, he did not congratulate the mother whose best and deepest feelings were aroused by the advent of her child, and who now turned to the tiny face to seek therein consolation for the father's desertion.

CHAPTER XVII

When, in the beginning of summer, the choice was left to Stella whether she would pass the summer at Oaklands or remain at the convent, she decided on the latter; not through indifference, as she took pains to explain, but having in view the definite purpose of accomplishing in three years the four-years' course, she did not wish to jeopardize her chances of graduation by any neglect of study.

In view of the condition of affairs at Oaklands, Mrs. Haughton readily consented; and with the exception of a two-weeks' visit to a particular chum just before the opening of the session, she applied herself almost as assidu-

ously as in mid-session.

Now, at the beginning of her last year, she was fully alongside of Morna Lea, the acknowledged leader of the seniors. Mauna Loa the girl was styled by her school-mates, with that sometimes singular appositeness of school-girl nomenclature, of which the significance is not far to seek, and the meaning of which is very obvious to all concerned when anything goes wrong with her.

Morna Lea's talents were indisputable, but her temperament was fiery, even to the verge of being *volcanic*; and when not restrained by the presence of the Superior and the sterner Sisters, her outbursts of temper were frequently

appalling.

For two sessions Morna Lea had stood foremost, and her great ambition was to be the first honor-woman in all departments. Many a girl had quailed at the thought of placing herself in competition with this vehement and revengeful nature; but Stella, encouraged by her classmates and instructresses, besides being urged on by the same ambitious aims, dared the result; and her courage rose with the occasion as she threw herself, heart and soul, into the contest.

When Morna Lea learned then that Stella Hope had dared openly to become her competitor, the explosions of her wrath were terrific. Both girls were orphans, and both knew they were to look forward to their own hands and brains as the artificers of their fortunes. The Sisters were only so many *Parcae*, impartial and inflexible.

Morna Lea had no relatives that she knew of. She had been adopted in infancy by a lady of small means, and when the latter died, recognizing the girl's talents though deriving little pleasure from them, she had bequeathed a small sum, with a slight addition from the church-society to which she belonged, to enable Morna to finish her education at the Convent of Santa Maria of The Doves.

So then the two girls started for the race, and they kept together for the three months preceding the Christmas holidays. Stella was cordially urged to come home for rest and recreation; but knowing that her competitor would remain to study, she regretfully declined. She could not allow her rival that advantage.

The new year opened with both girls showing the same determination and keeping equal pace. Spring approached, and under the great mental strain there was danger of breakdown, but they slackened not their efforts. In health, as in mental capacity, they were equally matched, for both had superb constitutions and much physical endurance.

Other girls, pining for home, wearied of their books and counted the days till the close; but to these two the hours sped too rapidly and the apple blossoms appeared to have bloomed almost out of the snow.

Here we will leave them till the close, and turn our eyes in the direction of Oaklands, where, with the perfumes of honeysuckles and jasmine floating on the breezes, we find the family seated in the same room as that in which we first found them. The afternoon mail had just been received, and as Nellie distributed it a sudden trembling seized her as she handed to her mother a letter with a foreign postmark.

Mrs. Haughton took it, and exclaiming "Carlsbad," eagerly broke the seal, and calling the attention of her daughters, read it aloud. Nellie was very thankful that the attention of

the family was directed to the letter and not to herself.

"Carlsbad, May 12th, 18—

" 'MY DEAR COUSIN KATE:

"From my long silence you have every right to suppose me beneath the sweep of the broad Atlantic, or under the turf of some European God's-acre; but I am pleased to inform you that the 'shackles of earth's immurement' still hold me a prisoner, and thanks to a merciful Providence and my physicians, I am greatly improved in health and able to locomote myself with the aid of my crutches.

"The famous Dr. — declares that medical skill can do no more for me; and such being the case, I shall now turn my face homeward to look after my interests, especially as a claim has been made upon my property which, if allowed, will take exactly half; but I shall not shed any tears over it as I shall still have

enough for moderate wants.

"Before going West to live permanently I shall be glad to stop over and make you a visit of a week or two, if entirely agreeable to yourself and family. Please be kind enough to reply at as early a date as possible, for now that I have determined to return home I am eager to start. My fidus Achates is still with me, and will accompany me wherever I go until we reach my home.

"Remember me very cordially to all my cousins, whom I hope to see in the near future;

and for yourself, accept my assurances of sincere regard.

"'Faithfully yours,
"W. WILLOUGHBY."

By the time the letter came to an end, Nellie had, to all outward appearances, regained her composure, and was the first to speak.

"Oh, mama, I am so rejoiced to hear his health is so much improved, even if he has al-

ways to use crutches!"

"Yes, it is certainly gratifying; but what a pity the poor fellow will lose half of his property," answered her mother, the ruling passion still very strong.

"I am sorry he has to bring that presumptuous Mr. Weston with him. I would suppose that Will might now dispense with the services

of a companion," remarked Marie.

Ethel had remained silent up to the present

moment. Now she said retrospectively,

"Rita and myself on one occasion almost had a stiff quarrel about him. She liked him exceedingly, and considered him a gentleman. I contended that Cousin Will's paid companion could not expect to be ranked as himself. We almost came to blows, because of her warm defense. Now, with a larger experience, and recollecting his general demeanor, I don't know but that she was right."

"He is well enough, if he had only recognized his place," answered Mrs. Haughton

dryly.

Then addressing her question to them all generally, she looked furtively at Nellie as she asked,

"Shall I write Will to come, girls?"

"Oh, mama, do write at once and insist! for now that he has lost so much of his property he may think that our cousinly interest has declined," and true-hearted Nellie reddened with shame at the bare idea.

Her mother saw the flush, drew her own conclusions, and when she had gathered her writ-

ing-materials together she soliloquized,

"Comparatively poor and a life-long cripple. Not a brilliant marriage for her, but I believe her to be sincerely attached to him. She is now twenty-four and no other prospect since she refused Alfred. Well, it is said marriages are made in heaven. I shall just let the affair take its course," and she wrote to Will to come, by all means.

"Nellie," said Ethel the next day, as they were sitting together, "I used to think when Will was here that if he recovered his health

he would propose to you."

"Nonsense, Ethel!" exclaimed Nellie, yet blushing notwithstanding. "How could you imagine a man so afflicted would be thinking of marriage? Besides, how could a homely body like myself stand any chance beside such a beautiful sister?"

"I did think at first that he had fallen a victim to my charms; but I was very rude to him once, and he never liked me afterward.

When he comes now I shall be very sweet to

him and cut you out."

"I have no doubt of your being able to do so, whether you try or not," replied Nellie; and though she laughed, there was an undertone of sadness in her voice which her younger sister, rendered wiser and more sympathetic by her late unfortunate experience, did not fail to detect. She answered quickly,

"I was only teasing you, dear; I hope I am a very different girl from the Ethel of three years ago. Besides, I could never wish to supplant a sister." Marie had come in now, and this little fling brought a conscious flush to her usually pale cheek; and rising, quickly she left

the room.

"Oh, Ethel! how could you so wound poor, unhappy Marie?" asked Nellie, much pained.

"It was entirely unintentional, I assure you. I began without thinking, and having started to say it, I did not know how to stop short. I think I have been wonderfully considerate of her feelings, never by word or deed to have reproached her."

"And so do we all think, my sweet sister, and honor you for it; she, most of all—she has told

me so."

"I do not deserve any credit for it, Nellie. If I had ever really loved Mr. Mora, I could not so easily have forgiven."

"Oh, yes, you would, dear. There has been a wonderful change in you for the better," and

Nellie patted her sister's cheek most affectionately.

"Poor Marie! I will go and ask her pardon for my thoughtless remark. She looks so sad,

and has so much to be regretful over."

She went and tapped at the door of her sister's room; but impulsively went in without waiting for an invitation to enter. Marie had just taken her awakened little daughter in her arms and was weeping over her. Tears sprang to Ethel's eyes, and moving quickly to her sister's side she stooped over and kissed her, saying,

"Dear Marie, forgive me; I spoke those words thoughtlessly. I had quite forgotten, as

well as forgiven."

And as the sisters embraced, Marie said,

"I can never forgive myself, dear, except in remembering from what fate I have saved you."

CHAPTER XVIII

Several weeks later saw Will and Weston installed in their old quarters at Oaklands. The congratulations that were showered upon the quondam invalid as he walked in, supported only by his crutches, were effusive but sincere. The welcome extended to Weston was polite, but scarcely more. If Mrs. Haughton could have gotten out of having him in her house she would have done so, notwithstanding the liberal board which she was to receive for him, and the very good use to which she could put the same. But she could not afford to offend Will through his friend, and always considering the question of expediency, she yielded to necessity and put the best face upon it.

Will had gracefully remembered all the members of the family while abroad, and the gifts which he brought were handsome and appro-

priate.

Weston presented but one, and that to Nellie, which she accepted with becoming appreciation; but when she opened the little package and saw it, she gave a cry of delight. It was a beautifully chased gold thimble, set round the rim with turquoises, a silver needle-case, and delicate embroidery-scissors, with other appurtenances of lady-like industry.

"Oh! Mr. Weston, how can I sufficiently thank you? You must be a wizard to have

guessed so exactly what I have been long wishing for. I shall always be embroidering to show my pretty thimble and scissors."

Not even Mrs. Haughton could object to such a delicate offering. She merely said, later, to

Nellie,

"If it had been anything else, I would not have allowed you to accept it; but a work-box—well!"

The two young men had heard no word of Marie's marriage, and were much surprised when she appeared with the little Florine. Her mother saved her some embarrassment by taking the child and saying,

"Here, Will, is another cousin that arrived at Oaklands last September, Miss Florine Mora. Marie has been married two years, but her husband is now in Mexico on business."

The little kinswoman was kissed and complimented, and Marie smiled in a gratified way, if a trifle sadly, and Will declared she inherited the Haughton beauty; but Marie looked embarrassed when he said,

"I hope I shall have the pleasure of meeting your husband, Marie, while I am here," which remark she answered so evasively that when Will and Weston were alone Will said,

"I don't think Mrs. Mora looks especially

happy, do you, Wess?"

"No, I do not. I am afraid she made a bad marriage; she is so faded, and happiness is always a rejuvenator."

Will smiled to himself at this remark; for a

few hours previous he had regarded his own image in the mirror, and had remarked to it,

"You look really happy, and handsome, old

fellow."

"I think Nellie looks younger and prettier even than she did three years ago," said Wes-

ton mischievously.

Had Mrs. Haughton heard the name of her daughter fall so familiarly from the lips of this young man she would no doubt have shown him the door; but the familiarity appeared not to strike Will unpleasantly. He only laughed, and said,

"You think so, really? Well, so do I."

Weston had waited expectantly for some mention by the family of Stella's name; but they appeared to have almost forgotten her existence; so he prompted Will to make some inquiry.

"Stella?—oh, yes; she will be home in a few days. She expects to graduate with honors, and return to us quite an accomplished young

lady," Nellie had replied.

The next day Weston left Oaklands on a trip of "only a few days," and suggested that as the hour of his return was not fixed no one need be sent to meet him.

During the few days that followed, Will and Nellie were thrown very much together, and then it was that she called upon him for a detailed account of himself for the three years of his absence.

He gave a pretty succinct narrative of all

that he had done and undergone from the time he had left Oaklands to the time of his return; how slowly and continuously he had endured untold tortures in the hope of restoration to health and usefulness, and how life would have been an intolerable burden but for the hope of ultimate triumph. Then at last had come the day when he had been told that medical skill could do nothing more for him, and, after having passed six months in visiting the most celebrated spots in Europe, he had joyfully turned his face homeward.

Incidentally he touched upon his coming loss of property, but declared that he had small cause for repining, in view of restored health and improved locomotion. Nevertheless, he would still have amply sufficient to maintain himself and even a wife—if he were so fortunate as to win one—in comfort, and some degree of affluence. All the while he was scrutinizing Nellie's face for some token of her feelings, some little betrayal of consciousness on which to fasten a slight ray of hope.

And she, frank as the light of day, never suspecting his motive in these communications, gave no sign of more than cousinly interest, nor guessed how deep was the disappointment which, after three years of unrelinquished

hope, he now experienced.

The old games of backgammon, as well as the readings, were resumed; sometimes she, sometimes he, reading aloud. There were moments when certain passages seemed so apposite that he was tempted to cast the book aside, and, taking her hand in his, to tell her the whole story of his love and fears and to ask her to share his life and diminished fortunes; but she appeared so entirely unconscious, so serene, that he ever stopped short with the tender words upon the tip of his tongue, fearing lest by the disclosure of his sentiments he might even lose the happiness he now could claim—the checkered happiness of sitting beside her, of looking into her clear, truthful eyes; of constant association with her; albeit there was one topic, dear to his heart, that he dared not broach.

If only once her voice had faltered, her hand had trembled, or an eyelid quivered, it would have sufficed; and their two souls would, "like the mingling of waters," have rushed into one.

CHAPTER XIX

Commencement! What youthful heart does not begin to bound, and nerves to tingle at the word? What a world of ambitious effort, of proud aspirations, does it not recall when, in after-years of disillusions, we look back to the moment when, standing with diploma in hand, we felt that practically we had "the world in a sling"?

The large auditorium of the convent was now crammed to its utmost capacity as the graduates, dressed in spotless white, took their seats,

awaiting the distribution of prizes.

It was a supreme moment when the orator of the occasion advanced and took his stand beside the table whereon lay the awards which were to crown their ambitious and faithful efforts.

Beginning with the least distinguished, many fluttering hearts were made proudly happy before Stella Hope and Morna Lea were reached. One moment more, and all the world—their world—would know which was the first-honor

graduate.

It was a moment of tense expectation. Stella is pale and red by turns, like the quivering and waving flashes of the aurora borealis, but fiery Mauna Loa is at white heat, her black eyes flashing with brilliancy, her heart a glowing crater.

Neither to her nor to Stella is it known whether either has a relative in all that massed crowd to smile approval upon untiring endeavor; yet each feels that it is a fateful moment, the turn-stile into the arena of future action.

The orator takes up a wreath of fair white flowers and, with aggravating slowness, continues,

"Behold here in my hand the second honor of this deservedly honored institution: second, because there cannot be two first honors. To the young lady whose fair brow is to be encircled by this graceful and appropriate tribute, let me say that the second honor here is far higher than the first award in many another college of less exalted excellence. Miss Morna Lea will please come forward and receive it."

There is some little delay, a slight whispering and confusion, and then the sudden disappearance through a side door of the young lady

in question.

After a pause a Sister comes forward, utters a few words, and takes charge of the wreath.

The speaker continues.

"I am sorry to announce that the young lady who obtained the second prize has been taken suddenly ill and has left the hall. She bears with her our heartfelt sympathy, as well as our praises for her distinguished attainments."

Taking up the last award, a beautiful crown

of flowers, he proceeds,

"This crown betokens the first honor; and

she whose head is to be adorned with this highest award of our venerable institution is a queen indeed. Queenly in accomplishments and intellect, and trebly queenly in all the graces of character that go to the making of a perfect womanhood.

"This coronal of Nature's own is awarded to her who has been foremost in earnest, conscientious, persistent effort—generous in emulation, noble in character, pure and lovely in all the attributes of female excellence. To Stella Hope this tribute is justly awarded; and with it go the love and benedictions of this pious sister-hood, whose pleasant duty it has been to train her youthful mind and help form her character. She will please present herself for coronation."

Amidst much flutter and moving of heads among the audience, Stella—our Stella—arises.

She is all blushes, but graceful and dignified in pose as she moves forward and stands in front of the speaker. Her back is turned toward one in the audience who sits intently watching her with a glance in which are expressed many and varied emotions.

He notes with intense pleasure the girlish, graceful figure, the noble contour of head and shoulders; and then she turns, crowned with flowers, smiles mingling with blushes, to take

her seat.

At sight of those features, so well known, yet changed to so much greater beauty and character, his heart gives a great leap, and then sinks suddenly to a feeling akin to dismay and almost consternation. She is too fair, too queenly for his presumptuous aspirations; and, with a sigh, he catches himself wishing that she were less fair, less like a young sovereign.

A mist comes over his eyes as the rapid thought flashes through his mind, "What if

after all she be not for me?"

He had intended under no circumstances to reveal himself to her on the present occasion; but he forgot his determination when, as valedictorian, she rose to read her address; and he leaned forward eagerly to catch every inflection of her voice, every expression of her mobile features.

We will not give the address to our reader, since the public is familiar with such efforts. It was only at the close that Weston found himself moved as, turning toward her fellow-

graduates, she said,

"We are now, my sisters, but as blocks of marble out of which a more skilful sculptor than Michael Angelo may some day evoke 'a possible angel.' Let us, then, whatever sorrows may betide, submit to the shaping chisel, and with the poet say,

"'O blows that smite, O hurts that pierce
This shrinking heart of mine,
What are ye but the Master's tools,
Shaping a work divine?
O hopes that crumble at my feet,
O joy that mocks and flies,
What are ye but the clogs that bind
My spirit from the skies?

Sculptor of Souls! I lift to Thee
Encumbered heart and hands.
Spare not the chisel; set me free,
However dear the bands.
How blest, if all these seeming ills
Which draw my thoughts to Thee
Should only prove that Thou wilt make
An angel out of me."

She had raised her eyes to heaven, and in the earnestness of her thought had unconsciously clasped her hands upon her bosom. A storm of applause burst forth as she descended the platform; and Weston murmured as she disappeared from his view,

"Too angelic for me to aspire to."

Before departing with the crowd, we will follow Morna Lea, after she so precipitately left the auditorium.

Pressing her hand over her mouth to stifle a cry of rage, she rushed to the dormitory and flung herself headlong upon her couch. Rolling and tossing in wild passion she tore her hair and anathematized the convent, the Sisters, the orator; and most deeply, with unquenchable hatred, her fortunate competitor, Stella Hope. So violent were her emotions that when, some minutes later, the Sister who had received her award came to bring it to her, and to offer sympathy for her disappointment, she was found lying face downward upon her couch, apparently in a faint.

With gentle, consolatory words, Sister Celeste laid the wreath beside the girl, when presto! she sprang from her recumbent posi-

tion, seized the garland, hurled it furiously upon the floor, and in a frantic outburst of rage trampled it under foot; at the same time pouring out such a torrent of invective and stormy passion as horrified the pious Sister to such a degree that, putting her fingers to her ears, she ran from the dormitory as if fearing that the judgment of Heaven might fall on her if she listened to such impious words.

After Sister Celeste had escaped from the girl's wrath, the latter remained standing a second as if struck with a sudden thought. An evil light illumined her passion-wrought countenance, and she stamped her foot on the floor.

"I will do it, and blast her forever," she muttered, with clenched teeth, and started for the door; but paused half-way to consider. Then she moved quickly to a dressing-table, took up a knife and a pair of scissors, and went out. In the space of ten minutes she returned, still smiling; but now with an expression of triumphant revenge deposited knife and scissors upon the table, and disrobing herself with all possible dispatch, got into bed. When the girls of that dormitory entered to retire for the night she appeared to be sleeping.

"Poor Morna! I am afraid she takes it very hard. But for disappointing the expectations of my friends and teachers, I would rather have lost the first honor than have crossed her," whispered Stella to a companion as they passed Morna's couch, of which the curtains were

only half closed.

"Nonsense!" replied the other girl. "The honor is justly yours, and there is not a girl in all the school, nor teacher either, that is not delighted at your carrying it off. With that fiendish temper of hers she will get many hard blows in the world; and I, for one, will not be sorry to see her humbled a few times."

"No whispering, young ladies. It is late, and some of you have to make an early start in the morning," admonished a Sister, and soon there

was silence in the dove-cot.

CHAPTER XX.

It was certainly a very genuine surprise, as well as pleasure, when, on the following afternoon, as she descended from the parlor-car at the Oaklands Station, Stella encountered Weston, cigar in hand.

The recognition was mutual.

"Why, bless my eyes! if this is not poor Dido's mistress, my young friend of three years ago," exclaimed he, in well-feigned astonishment as, throwing away his cigar and pressing forward, he took in his own her extended hand. She smiled her pleasure, in a half return of the old-time diffidence. Then Weston placed his other hand over hers in a silent pressure, really too much moved to say more at the instant.

In that brief interval, as she looked upon his scarcely changed face and heard the well-remembered voice, it all came back to her in a rush of feeling—that checkered summer of pleasure and pain. She forgot the lapse of time and the fact that she was no longer the child, but a young woman—forgot everything, except that once more she stood in imagination beneath the bending oak weeping distressfully over the dead pet in her blood-stained hand, as he, in sincere regret and sympathy, was comforting her.

The almost incessant application to study of the past three years had done wonders to bury the painful as well as sweet recollections of those by-gone days; but now the hand of Memory swept swiftly aside the veil, and it seemed almost as if the long interval were but a dream

from which she was even now awakening.

Weston read all this in her expressive face, and was satisfied with his well-planned coup; for the icy crust of reserve which separation and the lapse of time will frequently cause to form over the surface of diffident natures was now broken by one well-directed stroke. He was inclined to hug himself for the happy inspiration that had come to his aid at this critical moment.

They were talking on the platform when Uncle Ben, two minutes late, drove up with the Haughton carriage. Ashamed of even such a slight degree of unpunctuality, he leaped from the box with the youthful agility of twenty, and advanced, hat in hand, bowing almost to the ground, and in the excess of his pleasure, and expression of humble welcome, showing every tooth in his mouth.

"Howdy, Miss Stella; howdy, young master," was his greeting; but Stella, remembering many a kind word and act of the old servant when she had been an isolated inmate of her aunt's home, reached out her hand.

"I shall not be content with a salaam, Uncle

Ben; you must shake hands with me."

"Lor', Missis, you done growed so tall an' beaut'ful, I 'clar's fo' gracious I nuver would a-knowed you nowha's else in de worl'. I

'spec's young master here is almos' glad ter see you 's I is,'' said the old man, delighted at her hearty recognition. Weston joined in the laugh with which the privileged old servant punctuated his sly remark.

"Did any one bring a horse for me, Uncle Ben?" he asked, well knowing what the answer

would be.

"I'm 'fear'd not, sah. I b'lieves Mistis wusn't lookin' fur you at dis pertic'lar time. Least more, I didn't hear tell on it," answered he, looking much concerned, and assuming an apologetic expression.

"Never mind, Uncle Ben; I have no doubt Miss Stella will allow me a seat in the car-

riage."

"Why, come in, of course; no one can say it is not capacious enough for two," said Stella,

laughing.

"It is large enough for all one's friends—except on the present occasion," he answered as he got in, adding as he took the seat by her side, "I am glad there are only two of us now, for I have a world of things to tell and to hear."

"Then you must do all of the telling; there is little to hear from me. It has been study, study, study—nothing else with me for the three past years. But I shall delight to hear of your and Cousin Will's adventures and experiences."

She was looking at him now and smiling frankly, with none of the old-time diffidence;

and he was struck with the beauty of her ripe

lips and dazzling teeth.

"No, I will tell you all that some other time; now you must begin at the beginning and tell me everything about your studies, your particular preferences and difficulties, your classmates, your visits to Oaklands, and your awards; for," he added, "I have thought so much about you, and have been interested in your advancement, although you didn't do me the honor to tell me you were going off to school, that morning three years ago, when you left Oaklands so abruptly," regarding her attentively.

At this sudden reminder of the bitterness of that morning the blood rose to her cheek, her eyes filled with tears and, in a voice half-choked

with emotion, she said,

"Ah, the cruelty of it! I knew it myself only the evening before; and I was strictly forbidden to speak of it to any one, scarcely to say good-by. I have never known the cause of Aunt Kate's harshness on that occasion, especially at a time when my heart was almost breaking at the thought of going, and the dread of living among strangers."

Her auditor could have enlightened her as to the cause, but for the present he preferred to keep his own counsel. He therefore turned the conversation on her school life, the incidents of which she related to him, in humorous, vivacious, or pathetic tones as they recurred to her, looking back over the three years through the diminishing lenses of time and seeing all things

in their relation to the present.

Lastly, she told of her competition with "Mauna Loa," explaining the significance of the sobriquet, and ended modestly with her own winning of the first honor, and the fear of having incurred the lasting dislike of the disappointed competitor. Then her expressive eyes grew dark with feeling at the parting of teachers and chums, at the remembrance of which her voice sank pathetically; for the friends she had won had been very dear to this whilom isolated girl. As Weston sat and looked at the beautiful play of her features and listened to the cultured voice, giving wider expression to the fine command of language, his heart swelled with pride, and smiling with an inward satisfaction at some happy thoughts, he could scarcely refrain then and there from taking her hand in his own and telling her how far she surpassed his most sanguine expectations.

In the pleasure of seeing and listening to her he felt that every moment of this drive was running itself out "in golden sands"; and in order to prolong the time to the utmost he put his head out of the carriage window and asked Uncle Ben not to drive so fast as Miss Stella

wished to see all the old familiar scenes.

Then Uncle Ben, with a knowing wink at the horses, let them drop into a slow trot, and Stella smiled as she remembered that she had not looked out half a dozen times. She now did

look out, and perceived that they were nearing

the outer gate of the plantation.

"But here we are nearly home, and I have been telling you all these prosy things, when I so much want to hear about your wanderings. Tell me something of them," she said.

He answered,

"We are too near Oaklands now to begin. I hope to have many opportunities to relate the more pleasing incidents before we part again."

In a short while they were at the entrance of

the avenue.

"Oh," she exclaimed, "how delightful to know that I shall be free of school discipline once more. Already this glorious shade reminds me of my old untrammeled rambles in the green-wood. How I shall enjoy them again!" Joy and anticipation beamed from her eyes as she leaned far out of the carriage window to see her old giant; but Weston's eyes traveled no farther than her face, while a feeling of delight at being with her again took possession of him so intensely as to be almost pain.

"Miss Stella," said he, with a shade of anxiety on his face, as the carriage rolled in upon the broad graveled circle, "are we to be the same good friends as of yore, or will the fact of your being a grown-up young lady place

me at a chilling distance?"

She looked at him a moment in surprise, and

then said with feeling,

"Of course we are to be the same good friends if you wish. I cannot forget that when

I was almost friendless you were very good to me."

It was Uncle Ben's delight to dash rapidly around the circle, with much crashing of the white gravel under hoof and wheel, and then to pull up suddenly before the broad steps of the portico. All the family, including Will, were there to welcome Stella. Mrs. Haughton had frowned ominously when she saw Weston in the carriage; but she received her niece smilingly, and after kissing her, held her for a moment at arm's length to take a good survey of her. That the scrutiny was satisfactory was evidenced by her gratified smile.

Nellie's greeting was the same affectionate salutation as ever, but Ethel surprised her by the warmth of her welcome, and even Marie was

very cordial.

Will claimed the privilege of cousinship and kissed her heartily. Mrs. Haughton turned aside to Weston.

"How did you come, Mr. Weston?" she in-

quired coldly.

"I came in the carriage, Madam, as I thought you perceived," he answered with quiet dignity.

"I meant, did you come in the same train with my niece?" she explained impatiently.

"I presume so, Madam, since we met as we got out of the cars," he answered coldly.

"The train must have been behind time," she

remarked suspiciously.

"Possibly; I cannot say, though, as I do not know exactly when it is due," carelessly. He was becoming restive under these questionings and innuendoes. He resented their cool imper-

tinence, and now walked over to Will.

The baffled matron bit her lip in a determined manner. She foresaw that this young man would again give her trouble, unless she nipped it in the bud by laying the matter before Will and asking him to dismiss his now unnecessary companion.

After tea, when, according to her former custom, Stella was slipping into her old corner,

Nellie supplanted her, saying,

"You can never have it any more, Stella;

you have outgrown it quite."

It was to Weston a happy chance that he found himself beside Stella, as Will beside Nellie. He made the most of the circumstance, much to the indignation of Mrs. Haughton, who resolved to lose no time in speaking to Will.

Certainly she had never heard Weston make himself so agreeable; and his powers of entertainment were a revelation to her, strengthening her determination to get rid of him as soon as possible, seeing that he was a person dangerous to the peace of the family. He appeared to know just how to draw Stella out, and there was as much wit as ingenuousness in her parry and thrust. In the midst of an animated conversation she turned to Ethel and asked,

"By the way, when did you hear from Miss Rita, and will she make you a visit this sum-

mer?"

"I hope so; I had a letter last week in which

she said she might visit me later in the season."

"Oh! I am so glad. I used to worship her as some superior being; and so did you, didn't you, Mr. Weston?" she asked naïvely, turning toward him.

"Yes," he answered, somewhat taken aback, "I certainly admired her very much; but I believe Prudence held up a warning finger before I reached the degree you mention," he answered frankly.

"Why so?"

"Because," he replied steadily, "I knew that while everything a noble and charming woman should be, she must reasonably expect to make a brilliant marriage—a millionaire, or a title, perhaps. And I, even had I worshiped her as you say, had nothing to offer her worthy of her consideration."

"Except your own sweet self?" laughed Nellie. "Who knows what the result might have been? She has all the money perhaps that she wants."

"But I had another good reason at that time," said Weston.

"What was it?" asked Stella unguardedly.
"A previous attachment," he replied

gravely.

Did she understand, he asked himself, that she quickly and advoitly changed the conversation? He assuredly wished her to do so, yet in her even tones he detected no consciousness.

Later in the evening Stella was requested to

play. Very unassumingly she took her seat, and without trivial excuses played selection

after selection, as called for.

Her execution was quite brilliant and her taste and feeling artistic. Her auditors were genuinely surprised. She sang also, at the general request, and her voice, while inferior to Ethel's, was sympathetic and extremely pleasing. She played and sang as if she enjoyed the music as much as her auditors appeared to do.

In accompanying her back to the portico Weston found the opportunity he desired, to

ask, in a low tone,

"Why did you never reply to my letter, after

you went to the convent?",

"For the best of reasons—I did not receive one from you."

"But I wrote, explaining everything."

"Then the Mother must have confiscated it," she answered, glad to know that he had written.

Of course Weston knew well why he had not received an answer, but he took this occasion to let her know that he had written.

CHAPTER XXI

In vain did Weston turn and turn again his tumbled pillow that night in the wooing of the

drowsy god.

For three long years he had speculated upon the idiosyncrasies of this young girl and wondered into what manner of woman she would develop; but now he acknowledged to himself that she had greatly transcended his most glowing hopes.

Although he determined to hold fast to her identity with the Stella of earlier acquaintance, yet grasp for it as he would, it eluded him.

Even in his broken slumbers her personality seemed ever flitting before him in tormenting gaukelspiel, half mocking, wholly enchanting; and in every kaleidoscopic view of her many attractions she drifted farther and farther away from his outstretched arms, finally disconnecting, and leaving him decelets

appearing, and leaving him desolate.

And now Weston, who had for three years cherished the idea that in his own good time he would have only to put forth his hand and take to himself this maiden, sees her, like the golden apple of Hesperides, high, high above him; while a watchful gorgon in the shape of Mrs. Haughton was ever guarding her from his presumptuous reach.

After a restless and torturing night he rose early, and, drawn by an irresistible impulse,

sought the wood where he had first spoken with

her, and where he had acted as tutor.

Deep in meditation, with an unwonted sadness oppressing his heart, he walked toward the well-remembered spot. A slight exclamation startled him, and glancing up he caught the flutter of a white dress, and saw Stella standing before him, as blooming as a morning-glory.

Surely there was something telepathic in the impulse which had brought them to the same spot; at any rate, both were momentarily disconcerted; but with a woman's readier tact she

was the first to recover herself.

"You perceive," she said smiling, "that the lapse of time cannot efface from my memory the dear companion of my lonely girlhood."

"Is Dido the only companion you care to recall in connection with this place?" he asked,

regarding her earnestly.

The rose-tint deepened on her cheek; and then looking at him with the frankest smile, she

answered,

"By no means. I shall ever gratefully remember that to you, after my father, I owe the first stirring of my youthful ambitions; and the remembrance of you is as much connected with this spot as that of my poor little dumb pet."

"Connected with this spot! Then I am to infer that when you are introduced to the gay and fashionable world the recollection of myself, along with that of Dido, will be relegated to

the shades of this forest?" and, in spite of the effort to say this with mock ruefulness, there was an unsteady vibration in his voice that caught her sympathetic ear and made her hasten to say gravely,

"No; my heart is faithful to its early friendships. Besides, I do not expect to devote much of my time to the gay world. If my aunt has such designs, I must ask her to relinquish them. My ambitions are far other, I assure you."

Weston brightened up at this.

"May I inquire what are your ambitions?"

"Certainly; though I have nothing definite in view as yet. I wish to shape my future to please my generous uncle to whom I owe so much."

"I hope you will at least allow yourself a sufficient resting-spell. I know enough of college life to understand that a four-years' course, accomplished in three, must have been both mentally and physically exhausting."

"Thanks. Do I look mentally and physically

impaired?" she inquired, smiling archly.

He hastened to declare that she looked like Hygeia, freshly risen from her dewy couch.

But she went on earnestly.

"A habit of several years is difficult to break off suddenly. I very keenly recognize that in these few years I have only gained the entrance to the fair fields of Knowledge. I cannot be content to remain standing at the gateway. I wish to pursue some of my studies much farther, especially my German and French. As

I hope to go abroad some day, I will probably teach, in the fall, as a step toward that end."

"What! so soon? It would be unpardonable to allow it," he exclaimed in strong disapprobation.

"An American girl of eighteen is her own arbitress, isn't she?"

"And you would no doubt reject all friendly counsel," he said, tentatively.

"Not at all; provided it coincide with my own wishes," she answered, laughing.

He laughed also, but there was a soupçon of

bitterness in it.

"Ah! women are all alike, from the peasantgirl to the queen." Then with the view of bringing her back to the starting-point, he asked, "Do you remember the French lessons here? I suppose you now speak French like a Parisienne."

"Yes, I remember. I have often wondered at your patience; and once I remember you teased me, and I wept as foolishly as 'Sweet Alice' of Ben Bolt memory."

"" 'Would those days might come again," "

half hummed Weston.

"Are our childhood days the happiest, as some assert?" she asked with a certain sweet wistfulness.

"Cela depend," he answered briefly, foiled, and half vexed that she took every remark in such a matter-of-fact, impersonal manner.

"I cannot believe it; for I cannot think any period of life satisfactory without some definite aim, or object in view. None but an indolent nature can be content to recline at ease and look up at the stars, or drift away carelessly toward the uncertain Main of the Future."

Weston flushed a little as he replied.

"A noble aim, whether realized or not, must always ennoble character. I am afraid that I myself have not always had such high aims as you may think a man ought to have, but I hope I am not one of those inconsequent, drifting-with-the-tide natures that you condemn."

"Did you ever study for a regular profession?" she asked suddenly, as though the idea

had never occurred to her before.

"No," he replied, again disconcerted, perhaps by the unexpectedness of the question, but now that my dear friend is able to take care of himself I have considered the question of taking steps toward a settlement in life."

"Ah! I see how unselfish you have been in sacrificing your inclinations to the claims of friendship. Every one must honor you for that; but what have you thought of turning your attention to?"

"Special pleading," he answered with a quizzical expression that puzzled her, but which she

did not seek to have explained.

"I think if I were a man I should prefer medicine to law," she answered doubtfully.

"Why?"

"Because it appears to me there is a higher philanthropy in medicine." "Don't you think it better to select one's pro-

fession with reference to one's aptitudes?"

"Oh! assuredly, if we know what our aptitudes are. Some have more versatility than others, and might be successful in any one of several professions," smiling and bowing toward him with what he should have considered arrant flattery in one less frank than herself.

With a deprecating inclination in return, he replied,

"Well, I am convinced of mine; I have pon-

dered over it three years."

Perhaps it was just as well that the preparatory breakfast-bell rang at this moment. He was glad of it, for prudence dictated that it were better not to be too hasty. Stella turned to go.

"Allow me to accompany you. You need no longer be so under the domination of your aunt," he said, determined, once for all, to as-

sert himself.

The latter saw them returning in company, and cast a most disapproving glance upon Weston.

"I will speak to Will about it this very morning," she reiterated. Accordingly, as soon after breakfast as she could find him alone, she

began without ceremony.

"Will," said she, "I wish to speak with you in regard to your—companion. I know you have quite an attachment for him, and I have no desire to say anything offensive; but I must

say, that for a person in his position he has more presumption than any one I ever knew. I do not mind it so much on my own daughters' account, for I have trained them according to my own ideas; but you, or rather I, know how unconventional Stella has always been. It is due I suppose to the lack of early training, as her father was something of a crank. Stella, even yet, seems to have no discrimination as to the different grades of society."

She paused a moment, either to give Will a chance to put in a word, or to recover breath herself, and as he remained silent, she pro-

ceeded.

"This very morning she took a walk before breakfast with Mr. Weston. You must see for yourself that such presumption on his part is unpardonable and must be checked."

Again she paused; and Will, who had listened throughout, with a peculiar expression on his face, half comic, half impatient, replied,

"Weston told me of the circumstance, and said the meeting was entirely unpremeditated. Neither of them knew that the other had gone in that direction. Having met, he could, as a gentleman, do no less than accompany her home."

"Well, even granting that the meeting this morning was accidental, he has always been too

free-and-easy for one in his position."

Will faced around squarely.

"Cousin Kate," he said, "will you kindly do me the favor to define precisely his position?"

"Certainly; you yourself defined it sufficiently when you wrote of him as your *hired* companion," she answered somewhat sharply.

"I never used the word hired."

"You did not? Then you let it be inferred that he was hired; for no one would devote himself to another for nearly four years, as he has done, without compensation," she retorted.

Will smiled dryly.

"Yes, sometimes, though rarely, I must admit. But since his freedom of manners gives so much offense, perhaps it may be best for all parties to enlighten you as to our true relations. If that does not satisfy you, then my friend and myself must bid farewell to your hospitable roof and betake ourselves where the difference in our social positions will not be so marked," he answered with the nearest approach to sarcasm that she had ever heard from him.

"I told you I had no intention of offending,"

she began, half apologetically.

"So I understand; and it is unreasonable, I suppose, for me to feel aggrieved when the truest and most disinterested friend man ever had is snubbed and insulted before my face!"

"Then why did you not say friend in the first

instance?" she asked.

"Because in our case the terms are synonymous. He is paid, in a certain sense, but that does not render him less the gentleman. Had I the wealth of the Rothschilds I could never repay the loyal devotion he has, from first to last, given me. Moreover, he is my equal by birth

and education; and my superior in all that constitutes manhood. He was reared with expectations of great wealth, but relinquished the right several years ago. Still, he has enough to live on very comfortably. Much as I admire Stella, I am at a loss to see in what respects he is not her equal."

Mrs. Haughton hemmed, and looked em-

barrassed.

"Really, this is quite a revelation. You should have been more explicit in the beginning."

"I gave you credit for discrimination sufficient to recognize for yourself his superior

qualities," returned Will, smiling.

She now rose with dignity.

"To tell you the plain truth," she said, "we all have our pet ideas and prejudices. I judged from your letter that his social status was much inferior to yours, and I have never taken the trouble to search out his perfections. I regard the fault as more yours than mine."

"Very well, then, I will bear all the blame for the past, as you will have to do for the future,"

he replied, now smiling pleasantly.

"Oh! I suppose there will be no occasion for snubbing if he is all you claim for him," she answered, biting her lip in vexation. In vulgar parlance, "she had come to gather wool and had been shorn." She felt her discomfiture and was humiliated. Will repented somewhat of his plain speaking, and added,

"It is not entirely impossible that Weston

may yet recover a portion of the property he relinquished."

She did not reply immediately; but Will, watching the effect of the words, saw her features relax. Then she said, "Well, if he is a gentleman, I suppose we

"Well, if he is a gentleman, I suppose we must allow him the privileges of one," and abruptly left the room.

CHAPTER XXII

Will was walking up and down the portico that afternoon, smiling to himself, when Nellie

came out and joined him.

"I came out, seeing you all by your solitary; but to judge from the smilingness of your countenance, I perceive you have pleasant thoughts for company and I may be intruding," said she.

"Perhaps the cause of my 'smilingness' was that I had you in my thoughts," he answered. "I was just wishing you would come for a stroll down to the outer gate. The sun is almost setting, and the breeze is very refreshing. Will

you come?"

"Mit grosstem Vergnügen," she laughed; and they started rather too briskly for his crutches. But, as they proceeded, she was pained to observe that his gait slackened, and he was walking with more difficulty than she had noticed since his return. His color, however, was healthful, and his eyes bright.

"I am afraid I shall have to leave Oaklands soon," he remarked very unexpectedly, as they

were approaching the gate.

"Why? I hope you are feeling no worse

since you have been with us."

"Oh, no. Physically, I feel better; but your mother dislikes Weston so much, and has been treating him so coolly, that I fear he will not endure it much longer, and when he goes, I go.

She considers him very presumptuous; do you think so?"

Nellie flushed deeply with shame.

"No!" she answered emphatically, "I do not; and it shames me inexpressibly to see him

treated slightingly."

"I am glad to be able to tell you that hitherto it has concerned him very little; but recently, from a cause which I suspect, I observe that he is growing impatient of it; and, as I have said, when he wishes to leave, we will go together."

They had now reached the outer gate, and he was resting against it, breathing somewhat la-

boredly. Nellie was silent.

"Do you think," he asked, "that Stella would be making a mésalliance, or be sacrificing her-

self in any way to marry Weston?"

"Assuredly not, if she loves him. When heart answers to heart, and every requirement of one's soul finds its complement in another, the outward or merely social feature is of minor importance. It would be sweet to share even poverty and misfortune with such an one."

Will's eyes grew brighter as he listened, and looked into hers with mute but eager question-

ing.

"Ah!" he said after a pause of some seconds, "if all women thought as you, there would be more happy homes, and many waste-places of life would blossom as the rose. Could I but hope to win for my poor maimed self the priceless boon of such a love, the gloom which now envelops my future would all be dispelled, and

earth would become an Eden. But I am afraid no heart will ever beat the quicker for my halt-

ing step."

The sun was setting in a crimson glory; and when he turned his face to hers, as she too leaned against the gate, there was a glow—whether reflected or not—upon her cheek; and, yes—he could not be mistaken—there were tears upon her down-cast lashes.

A rush of feeling swept over him, and, bend-

ing toward her, he quoted,

"'Lift up thine eyes; my doubts are dead,
My haunting sense of hollow shows;

* * * * * * * * * * * *

Look up; and let thy nature strike on mine; Lay thy sweet hand in mine, and trust to me."

His soul was in his eyes; and she, looking up, read there the story of his hopes, fears and

waiting.

He held out his hands; and, frank as Juliet, she placed her own within them. As he drew her to him, the sun dropped below the horizon, leaving its last rays resting upon them, like a benediction.

Will had dropped his crutches and she now

offered to pick them up.

"No, let them lie," he said, smiling happily. "I shall need them no more. Love has wrought a miracle upon me. See!" he cried gaily, stepping back from her and standing erect in proud happiness, "I am a living proof of the magic power of Love!"

"What is it?" she exclaimed, awe-struck.

"Can you really stand and walk without them—or—or have you been deceiving us since your return?"

He came quickly back to her side, saying,

"It is both a miracle and a deception, dearest; for without the hope of your love as a stimulus, I would never have submitted to the tortures I have undergone in the way of treatment."

"But how long have you been able to walk

unassisted?" she asked wonderingly.

"Some months ago my physicians pronounced me able to do without my crutches. I could scarcely trust to the assertion, but I determined to make the attempt, and broke away from them. At first I could only hobble a little, but as I persisted I gained in strength. I did not wish to leave Europe until I was positively assured that I was permanently cured, so I remained some months longer abroad, traveling, though my heart was hungry for the sight of you. Then it occurred to me that it would be so sweet to hear from your own lips that you loved me in spite of deformity, that I have been punishing myself for the last five days by resuming my crutches."

"You arch deceiver!" exclaimed Nellie, endeavoring playfully to release her hand from

his, but Will clasped it closer.

"Forgive me, dear, and tell me if you do not love me better for being the physical peer of other men?"

But Nellie's loving blue eyes were now

streaming with blissful tears, and between laughing and sobbing she hid her face against his shoulder, declaring that nothing could ever make her love him better than she had loved him for the three long years since his infirmity had first appealed to her.

"Then," declared he, kissing away her tears, "if it was my infirmity, I have lost ground by being cured. I shall have to look out for another accident to reinstate myself,

eh?"

But she protested that nothing under the sun could have caused her such happiness as his complete restoration, and that she would never cease to thank Heaven for it.

And so, with sweet interchange of tender sentiments and Love's badinage, they walk home in the gloaming, Will carrying the crutches under his arm. He was greeted with astonishment, but laughingly explained the miracle, to be overwhelmed with heart-felt congratulations from all the family. All were happy but forsaken Marie, who turned sadly away to suppress a sigh of sorrow as she reflected upon the contrast of her future with that of tenderhearted, faithful Nellie.

The engagement was discussed en famille the ensuing day. Will was urging an early marriage, to which he had won Nellie's consent. Mrs. Haughton wept a little at the thought of resigning her chief counselor and comforter into the hands of another, but she wished her all the happiness she "so well deserved," and ex-

pressed the hope that Will would be able to

make her "entirely comfortable."

"After all," said she, drying her eyes philosophically, "marriage is but a lottery, and no one can know beforehand whether a girl is drawing a capital prize or a blank. There is Marie, who thought she was marrying a Croesus and Chesterfield in one, and see the result. Ethel's establishment in life will be a great care to me, since I am so encumbered with mortgages as scarcely to be able to pay the interest, and I am utterly unable to give her a chance to do anything for herself. It is hard to think that she will be the old maid of the family; for her prospects are dwindling." And at the harrowing idea fresh tears coursed down her cheek.

Nellie, in loving words, sought to comfort her mother.

"Dear mama, don't borrow trouble. Ethel shall not be your care alone. She must pass the coming winter with me in St. Louis. I know her beauty and accomplishments will make her fortune there. She will now have the experience and wisdom to choose well."

This promise of Nellie's did more than anything else to win Mrs. Haughton's consent to their early marriage. Will stipulated for August, pleading business engagements and everything else he could think of, saying that he wished to take his bride through Canada and the larger Northern cities before the weather

should become too cold. He carried his point,

and for August the marriage was fixed.

Nellie and Ethel immediately went off to purchase the *trousseau*, and Will wandered around disconsolately till Nellie's return, seeming to prefer solitude and his own meditations, a state highly gratifying to Weston; who now, unrestricted by Mrs. Haughton, became Stella's shadow, continually calling on her to walk, to ride, to play—anything that they might be together.

No word of love had yet passed Weston's lips, for he did not wish to disturb her serenity until he felt himself on sure ground. He asked himself what this young girl, so recently emancipated from school, could know of powerful sentiments of the heart? He must give her time to know herself. He must wait, and watch, he must weigh every word, glance, blush, and inflection of voice.

She was merry, often witty or brilliant; and, better than all, spontaneous. She had now been too long from under her aunt's domination not to be free and out-spoken. There was honesty and frankness in every lineament of her mirror-like face. He would know the proper moment to declare himself.

That she highly esteemed him as a friend, and enjoyed his companionship, he could not doubt; but dare he ever hope for that deeper sentiment which, like the tranquil depths of the ocean, no tempest can disturb, no storm of adversity change, let the ever mobile surface vary as it

will; but for that immovable substratum upon which the foundation of wedded love must rest—might he dare hope to become the recipient of love like that?

CHAPTER XXIII

A few days after Stella's return home, Weston reminded her of her expressed wish to resume the study of the German language, suggesting that they read it together.

"I shall be delighted. I suppose you speak it like 'ein geborner Deutscher,' "she replied.

"Well, modesty forbids me to claim quite such proficiency, but I must be a dullard indeed if I cannot speak it pretty correctly. I have had much practice both at home and abroad."

"How delightful! I am ready to begin when-

ever you are."

"Very well then; let us begin at once."

Accordingly she went and brought "Maria Stuart."

"I was just at the beginning of the Fotheringay scenes when I left off. Lord Macaulay was of the opinion that Schiller wrote nothing finer," she remarked.

"I quite agree with him, if we except "Wal-

lenstein's Tod.' "

"Oh, yes. My German teacher advised me to read that, if I read nothing else," then added, "I am so fortunate to have you assist me."

"I am the fortunate one," he replied gal-

''I have nothing but 'Mary Stuart,' though,''
she said.

"Never mind; I have the whole set," provident fellow that he was.

"Shall we begin at the Fotheringay scenes?"
"Yes; I had begun already to be interested."

She opened the volume at random, and her eye fell upon the passage in which Elizabeth draws off her ring to present to the Duke of Anjou's matrimonial ambassador, for his royal master, in which she remarks thoughtfully,

"Der Ring macht Ehen, Und Ringe sind's die Kette machen."

Stella read it aloud, remarking laughingly, "Oh! wise Elizabeth. Wedding rings assuredly make chains; therefore, Mr. Weston, beware of wedding rings."

"Humph!" he replied, looking slightly discomfited, "if I had known the play contained

such heresies, I would have burned it."

They chose a quiet and shady spot on the lawn and read an hour, for a day or two, Stella's interest ever deepening; but her feelings were the most deeply stirred at the passage where Mary, on her way to execution, encounters Leicester, and speaks to him with gentle reproachfulness,

"You keep your word, Earl Lester; you promised Me your arm to lead me out of this prison, and You lend it to me now. Yes, Lester, and not merely For freedom was I to thank your hand. You were to make that freedom dear to me. Upon your arm, made happy by your love, Was I to rejoice in the new life."

At these words, so replete with human feeling, in which wronged love and forgiveness were commingled, some inward chord in Stella's nature, acutely vibrant, stirred to a harrowing recollection, and she involuntarily turned to regard Weston, with a glance in which unutterable things were spoken with the eye; for the buried Titan again writhed beneath the piled masses of Ossa on Pelion.

With half an inkling of its meaning, he asked for an explanation, which naturally she refused

to give.

Next they read Wallenstein's Tod, and she excited his jealousy by her ardent admiration of Max Picolomini, declaring him and Henry Esmond her "especial favorites, next after my first love, the *pius* Aeneas," she laughed.

"What, after his desertion of Dido?" he

asked.

"Ah, well," she answered slowly and as he thought with significance, "all men are I suppose alike in that respect. Fickleness and inconstancy appear to be the general and inherent characteristics of your sex."

"That is entirely too sweeping an assertion, Mein Fraulein," he replied gravely. "Your limited experience of life does not warrant you in making such a charge. Frequently it is only

that appearances are against one."

Did he have a suspicion of her meaning? At any rate, he took early occasion to revert to the time just before her departure for the convent

and to explain the part Mrs. Haughton had taken in that affair, as also to mention the letter that the Mother Superior had suppressed. In relating these circumstances he made no allusion to the state of his feelings toward her at that time except as of a very sincere friend and well-wisher; and she on her part only smiled in an inscrutable manner and changed the subject.

Thus they read much of Schiller, and during that time in which so many noble and sublime thoughts and sentiments were expressed, the interchange of opinion brought them into intimate acquaintance and revealed the mental processes of each in a manner which could not otherwise have been achieved. The result was much discussion, much badinage with flash and retort,

and occasionally clash.

For one so young and inexperienced she exhibited remarkable penetration in the judgment of character and motive, and often astonished Weston by her acute intuitions and observations, occasionally revealing a fund of philosophy, and even a touch of satire, keeping him at bay when he would have poured out his whole heart in a declaration of love.

Let it not be supposed that Stella was either pedantic, or unduly dignified. Her delight in the little Florine was unbounded; and when engaged in playful antics and romps with her the one appeared almost as much a child as the other. The little one soon became as much attached to this playmate as to nurse or mother,

and would hold out appealing hands when in the mood for a romp. Then Stella would seize her in her strong arms and toss her in the air, or roll her on the floor, towsling her curly golden hair for the mere pleasure of re-curling it afterward around the lovely little face.

But the child's greatest delight was to entangle her own little fingers in the abundant locks of her playmate, laughing and cooing, tangling and pulling, to her heart's content.

It was in such sport that Weston caught a glimpse of her one day, and the sight sent a warmer current to his heart. She raised her face, rosily flushed, in time to see him as he approached, and unconscious of her disheveled coiffure, held Florine out to him.

"Isn't she the most perfect picture?" she cried, looking at the little creature lovingly.

"See if she will leave me for you."

He tried to entice the child away; but to Stella's delight, she turned away, placing her arms around her playmate's neck and laying her little warm cheek close to hers; uttering a

happy, cooing laugh.

"Ah! little one, you are showing your taste early," said Weston, patting the round cheek; and then he tried his arts in winning Stella away from the child. He succeeded at last by feigning despondency at the approaching marriage and loss of his life-long friend.

"You know," said he, "that a man is never the same to his bachelor friends after he is married, and I shall henceforth be a wandering, melancholy spirit, without home or kindred ties."

"But you will always be a valued guest with

them," she answered consolingly.

"Ah! no; the contrast between their happiness and my loneliness would be too great."

"Then I would say, go thou and do likewise,"

she answered, laughing.

"I can not win the regard of women, I fear.

No, I will have to struggle along alone."

She was about to take up the cudgels in his own defense, when suddenly she checked herself, paused a moment in embarrassment, and then said,

"I understood you to say recently that you had some thoughts of taking up a profession. That will be sufficient to keep you from feeling

utterly forlorn, will it not?"

He shook his head in pretended mournfulness, and looking her full in the face, replied with emphasis,

"Without the guiding Star of Hope, I know

that my efforts will be futile."

"That," she replied, unobservant of his double intendre, "appears to me like a child refusing bread because it cannot have cake."

"I see you have no sympathy for my coming

bereavement," he answered reproachfully.

"I do feel for you, really and truly; but you will be no more alone than I will, when I go away to carve out my fortune."

"I wish we might be somewhere near each

other, to cheer and encourage," he replied tentatively.

"I shall keep melancholy at bay by constant occupation," was the disappointing answer.

Then he tried another expedient.

"Come to the piano and teach me to play 'Away with melancholy." She laughingly followed, and took a seat by his side. At first his efforts were successful, but after a little there seemed to be retrogression instead of progress.

"Use all your fingers. No one can hope to become an accomplished pianist with only one finger," she said, laughing merrily at his awk-

ward efforts.

"I can't manage them all at the same time; for when I put my thumb on one key, the little finger will slip off, and vice versa. Will you kindly hold my little finger on the keyboard while I give all my attention to the others?" he requested with all the appearance of earnest endeavor.

She complied amusedly; and so long as she held down that finger, he succeeded admirably, but as soon as she let go he blundered again.

"See," he said, with a glance full of meaning, "how well I do when you are helping me! If I could have your assistance always some-

thing might be made of me."

At this remark she showed some little consciousness, as was evidenced by the deepening of her color. For the first time, also, she caught sight of her disarranged hair in the mirror, and made that the pretext for going away.

"Don't go just yet," he pleaded, "I have a great favor to ask of you."

"What is it?"

"I have taken a great fancy to that little stray ringlet that has escaped confinement near your ear. As I shall be going away before long, will you give it to me as a keep-sake?"

"Certainly," she replied in the most matterof-fact way; and Weston again felt baffled. He wished her to regard the gift in the same

light that he did.

"Wait just a moment more," he begged. "Please play 'Consolation' for me, and then I will take you to the most delightful fishing-place I have discovered. I have baited it, and the fish bite rapidly. There is a fallen log across the stream, and we need fear no snakes nor other reptiles."

She took up Mendelssohn's "Lieder" for the first time since her return from school, and opened the volume. As she did so, a bank note

fell from it on the key-board.

In much surprise, she took it up.

"What can it mean?" she said, looking at Weston.

"Perhaps a sprinkling of nuggets to make you dig deeper in the mine of music," he suggested.

She now shook the book and several more

fell out.

"This grows interesting," remarked Weston, "are there more?" But no more were found. "I think I can explain it," said she. "The

Mother always returns moneys of the girls left over on the expense account. She put this here where she knew I would find it."

"I see," replied Weston.

"Don't you think," he continued, "that by taking another lesson on 'Away With Melancholy' to-morrow I can get it by ear?"

"I think it sounds as if you had it by both ears already," she replied, as she ran laugh-

ingly out of the room.

Soon she returned to go with him fishing. He was waiting on the portico.

"Where is the tackle?" she asked.

"Oh yes, the tackle. I had forgotten its essentiality," with a quizzical expression. But he went and brought it.

When they had fished some time unsuccess-

fully, she remarked.

"They will not bite; we may as well go

home."

"Oh, you don't know the disposition of fishes. They have to be coaxed, and it takes just half an hour."

"How absurd!" she laughed.

"I can tell you a plan, though, to make them bite in five minutes."

"How?" she asked with interest.

"By naming them."
"Naming them?"

"Yes; you name some person you like for

your catch, and I will name mine."

"Well, then, I will name mine Cousin Nellie."

"Ridiculous! the person must be of the opposite sex."

"I will name it Cousin Will then."

"No engaged person is eligible. I intend to name you and I think I am entitled to a return of the compliment."

"Very well, then, here goes."

Weston took out his watch solemnly. In just three minutes he drew up a small fish. Stella had a nibble, and drew up her line with such a jerk as to entangle the line in the overhanging bough of a tree.

"Hang it!" began Weston, and then both

laughed, for the fish remained suspended.

"A too speedy execution of sentence, Judge Lynch; I insist on the rescue of the prisoner."

They chatted, laughed, and fished until Stella suddenly perceived that the sun was almost setting.

"Come; we will be late, and Aunt Kate will

not like it," she said.

"But the twilight is long," he urged.

She insisted, however, on going, and he rose

to assist her along the log.

Now that log had been perfectly stable when they had walked it first. Why it should roll now was mysterious, and to such a degree that as she approached the bank Stella would have been precipitated into the water if Weston had not caught her, and when, all blushes, she thanked him, he assured her that she was most welcome.

As they were crossing the bridge, he said,

"Let us watch the sunset reflected in the water."

Stella rested against the railing, looking down at a point where the stream was very

placid.

"I never stand thus looking down into still water that I do not recall my childish impressions, when after a heavy rain I would go out and stand on the brink of some newly made pool and gaze down toward the reflected skies below, fearing to lean too far over, lest I should fall miles and miles down into those pellucid depths, yet fascinated by that strange, unknown under-world. Did you ever do the like?" she inquired.

"No," he replied, gazing earnestly upon her face. "But if I might take you along with me now I would be willing to make the plunge to almost any unknown region. Could you be per-

suaded to take the leap with me?"

"Halloa!" cried Will, as he and Nellie turned the corner at that moment, much to Weston's chagrin; for he had never felt less desirous of his friend's company. Nellie looked at Stella's deepened color and smiled.

"Have you been fishing?" she asked.

"Yes; don't you see the trophy?" asked Weston, holding up the little fish he had first

caught.

"Oh!" laughed Nellie, "if you are so fond of fish as that, I must take you all to-morrow to a splendid place for catching mountain trout. It is right up there at the cascades, not more than ten miles from here. The ascent is a little bit arduous, but we can ride on mules nearly the whole way. What say you all?" but she looked somewhat anxiously at Will, as if fearing it might be too much for him.

But all three declared they would like nothing better, so the excursion being decided upon and an early start arranged, they walked

homeward through the gloaming.

CHAPTER XXIV

The party of four started off after a very early breakfast, in high spirits. To the foot of the mountain, a distance of eight miles, they went in the carriage, and there it was to await their return in the afternoon; but four strong saddle mules were led to that point by Uncle Ben's two younger sons, who were to accompany the party to be of service in attending to the mules and in preparing the trout the fishers were to catch; for it had been decided there was to be no dinner till a sufficient number of

trout had been landed to have a "fry."

The drive along a green and flowery valley was delightful in the cool of the early morning. Here and there meandered clear streams, in which numerous small fishes were disporting themselves in joyous security and imagined perpetuity of the blessings of finny existence; but higher up, on the mountain, whence the "cascades" leaped and tumbled, the trout, from frequent invasions of their demesnes, had learned to be wary; and at the approach of a footstep, whether of man or beast, would dart under the shadows of protecting rocks and snags, peering out cautiously, so that the still more wary angler was fain to possess his soul in patience.

At the steeper portions of the ascent,—nowhere very considerable,—Nellie, fearing lest the mule might stumble with Will and perhaps injure him, insisted on his going a-foot as she also did; both aiding their efforts by holding to the mane of the mules, Will protesting there was no danger in riding, and she declaring

there might be.

Weston and Stella laughingly refused to walk, since they each had a beast of burden to perform that office for them. Consequently, they made much more rapid progress, and soon were nearing the falls, when perceiving that these same beasts of burden were giving evidences of undue fatigue, they drew rein under a chestnut tree at the log cabin of a mountaineer and proceeded to water the thirsty animals at a small stream that trickled into a pool just outside the rail fence that enclosed the yard.

Only a very wrinkled old woman, seated on a wooden bench near the door, and a half-grown

girl were visible.

The old woman rose and hobbled toward them; when taking a rustic seat under the tree she accosted them thus,

"Ye be's husbent and wife, I calc'lates," regarding them with eyes that yet looked piercing

under a blue calico sun-bonnet.

"Not yet, but soon to be, I hope," answered Weston, boldly glancing at Stella, who reddened a little.

"Is that so, now? I s'pected ye was sweethearts ef ye wasn't already married. When's ye calc'lating ter jine fo'ces?" she asked with a cunning grin that showed toothless gums.

Before Weston, whom Stella perceived to be enjoying the situation, could reply, she answered quickly,

"The time is not exactly set yet awhile, grandmother, but I think that I will wait till my reincarnation, several thousand years hence."

"Yi, yi," cackled the old woman, not understanding her meaning, "don't you be skeared, honey,"—to Weston—"she'll come 'round afore the winter. These young gals all 'mind me o' our pippins as hang so high in the summer-time. The wind blows so soft, and is a-courtin' and a-courtin' uv 'em fur weeks and weeks, but the mo' the wind blow, the mo' dem apples tosses disdainful on de bough, but a mellowin' all de time, and gettin' purtier. You looks mighty dollified and courtable now, Miss, but de time's comin' when you mus' choose 'atween yer two beaux-de summer wind and Jack Frost. All de young folks as is goin' ter git married orter marry afo' de cold winter comes."

"What about those that don't want to get married at all?" asked Stella, more with the intention of interrupting her than hearing any-

thing she might have to say.

"Dey as don't marry 'minds me uv dem sour crab-apples. Dey wouldn' listen to no persuadin', but tossed dey heads higher 'n all, and 'lowed dey would n' drap for nobody; so dey stayed on de bough, and jes' dried up. Dey is de old maids. So git married, Miss, and git married befo' de cold winter comes."

When the old woman finally came to a halt, Stella was crimson, and Weston, though laughing heartily, was blushing too. She drew her bridle and made a move to go, but he, thinking the old crone's advice valuable, proposed to wait awhile longer for their two companions.

"Can you tell fortunes, grandmother?" he

asked.

"Yas, in coffee grounds for a dime," she answered promptly.

"Then let us hear," he said to Stella.

"No; I don't care for mine to be told," she replied, but Weston insisted, "just for the fun of the thing," and the old woman, with an eye peeled for gain, quickly dispatched her grand-daughter for the "grounds." Having received the cup, the old woman felt on the top of her head for her "specs" and poured out the coffee grounds on a piece of plank for plainer reading. She turned to Weston.

"The lady, first," said he.

Had it been less foolish, Stella would have demurred; but as it appeared to entertain Weston she remained silent. Then the old woman looked at her searchingly for fully ten seconds before remarking,

"She is one uv de kind as takes a pow'ful wind ter blow her off'n de tree. She's got ter see mighty plain whar she's gwine ter drap. Tain't 'cause she's too skittish, but 'cause she's too notiony." Then addressing Stella directly, she continued,

"You's goin' ter have good luck and bad

luck,—lots uv it,—but de good luck'll last longest, mebbe. You's gwine ter''—shifting the grounds—"you's gwine ter be ill; but you'll rise up agin and light out whar you nuver spected ter go. Dar you'll stay and suffer, and be sorry, mebbe; but—"

"Oh! come, will you? I've heard enough of this rigmarole," exclaimed Stella, very disagreeably impressed, in spite of her vaunted incredulity. And she struck the innocent mule sharply with her whip and hastened away, leav-

ing her escort to follow at his pleasure.

He, laughing at her evident discomfiture, cast a coin into the lap of the old woman and hastened after Stella, whom he overtook just as

Nellie and Will came up.

They had soon ascended to the cascades, and a really beautiful scene they beheld, well worth in itself the long and hot ride. The mountain was here very rough and broken, with huge boulders piled all around, and fine trees up to the very summit, leaving here and there several vistas opening upon a magnificent extent of country. To Nellie and Stella, neither of whom had ever traveled to any extent, these views excited great delight; and even Will and Weston, who had visited most of the picturesque wonders of the Old World, admitted that the view from a certain point was very fine.

But the trip had consumed more time than they had expected, and as there was to be no dinner without the trout they all decided that, considering the patience to be exercised in troutfishing, it would be better to defer further admiration of the scenery until after dinner, when, they all declared, they might be in a better

frame to do justice to its beauties.

Will and Nellie were satisfied to take their position a little below the lower fall, but Weston whispered to Stella that he knew enough of trout-fishing to feel assured that they could be better caught higher up between the first and second falls. Consequently, the former couple had a fine two-pounder before the latter had settled down to work.

Will wished to convey a message of his good luck, but the colored boys were at some distance with the mules, and he did not wish to shout for

fear of frightening all the trout away.

"I will go and tell them; and in an hour perhaps I may be able to bring you intelligence that enough have been caught for our 'fry,' " said Nellie, demurely, well suspecting what the answer would be.

Will only looked at her, smiling, a moment,

and then said,

"Do go; there's a good child, and let me fish in silence. I promise to have several by the

time you return."

Then Nellie pouted, and really half hurt, declared she 'd stay and chatter all the while just to punish him; at which Will laid aside his rod for a full minute to make his amende, which being entirely satisfactory, they angled together very amicably.

Weston proved not so successful as his friend,

who had caught two before he himself had caught his first. The fact was, he was too busy angling in another direction to pay sufficient attention to the finny denizens of the stream; but Stella, he found, was far more wary than they and successfully baffled every effort to bring her to land or even to regard the bait. Amid the deeps or shallows of their conversation she contrived always to evade the subject nearest his heart, and when he had highest hopes that she was about, metaphorically, "to take the fly" she would dart away in a manner sufficiently tantalizing to vex a much more saintly wooer.

He was soon forced to perceive that the time still was not yet ripe for direct declaration; for he felt intuitively that the result of a too precipitate offer of his hand would elicit only a direct refusal. Therefore, in every possible way he had endeavored, tentatively, to signify to her the state of his affections and hopes without giving her a chance to refuse him unequivocally. But Stella, proving deaf and purblind to all hints, and affecting to misunderstand every intimation, he lost patience at last, and turned moodily to the obvious business in hand—the trout-fishing.

Under such circumstances, it was no wonder that at last Will shouted to them to come on, since he and Nellie had caught enough for dinner; for, in addition to three he had himself caught, Nellie had safely and triumphantly

landed a one-and-a-half pounder.

"You must blame Miss Stella for the failure," declared Weston. "She kept up such a scintillation of verbal pyrotechnics that even at midday she put the sun to shame and drove the trout to the shadows of the rocks."

"And 'Jura answered back to Jura," she

retorted.

"Shall I tell them what good advice the old woman of the hut gave you this morning?" asked Weston, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

"If you dare!" she cried.

"Let's have it, by all means," they exclaimed.

"Certainly. It was intended for you, too."

"Then out with it, if it's common property," said Nellie.

Weston affected to make a relation of it.

"She advised that—"

"If you tell it, I'll not speak to you for a week!" declared Stella vehemently, blushing

furiously.

"Ah! well then, friends, under threat of such a heavy penalty you must excuse me; I das n't tell." For which he received a grateful look that was some compensation for her elusiveness of the morning.

Dinner over, the question was whether to continue the angling for a while, in order to take a mess home to show that home-folks had not been forgotten, or to begin at once their return, seeing there was a cloud, 'no bigger than a man's hand,' it is true, rising in the west. It

was decided to continue the fishing, and soon all together were intensely interested; for having sought a new place, Stella and Will both brought to land a trout each of satisfactory pro-

portions.

"I see that I am the Jonah," whispered Weston; so he went a little farther up stream, fastened on a fly of most attractive appearance, and lying flat upon the ground out of sight, trailed his bait swiftly up the current, and waited. He did not have to wait long; for a splendid fellow immediately sailed out from the shadow of a large rock and made a dash for the fly.

Alas, for the rash one! Recognizing instantly his error, Sir Trout turned quickly and sped away for his shadowy refuge, but never reached it. The line grew taut, and the struggle began. All stopped to watch, the interest increasing each moment, until finally the flashing and flopping creature lay gasping on the bank at a safe

distance from a leap back into the stream.

"Goodness me! look at the sky," suddenly exclaimed Nellie in consternation; and indeed, so engrossed had they all been that no notice had been taken of the threatening aspect of the weather. The erstwhile small cloud had almost miraculously expanded and blackened until it covered nearly all of the visible sky with a pall, and a strong wind was springing up, hurrying the dark masses of cloud along with fearful rapidity.

Fortunately, the colored boys had been more observant than themselves, and the mules, al-

ready saddled, stood ready near at hand. At a speed far from safe they all hurried down the mountain-side in order to reach the hut where Stella and Weston had paused in the forenoon.

It was well that they reached it in time, for instantly such a storm broke loose as was rarely seen. The wind raged with almost cyclonic fury; the rain fell in a deluge; while incessant flashes of lightning lit up the whole mountainside with a fierce glare, and all "the artillery of heaven" appeared to be in continuous action. Amid the general awe and detonations no word was spoken, for none could have been heard.

Fortunately, the storm, though of unusual violence, was of rather short duration; and a few minutes after the rain ceased, the clouds parted, and the sun shone out in fitful splendor. Soon, however, the wind whisked the clouds away; and Stella, seeing the old woman's mouth opening to speak, proposed starting homeward without delay.

"Do set a bit, young-uns, and let me tell the furchens of this other pa'r," urged the crone, remembering the generous coin Weston had bestowed upon her, and thinking to make a profit-

able day of it.

"No, no!" cried Stella impatiently, "the

storm may return this way."

"And you wants to ketch it, eh?" cackled she of the wrinkles, with a malicious grin. "You'd better set a little longer any way, and let me talk to you a bit. The winter's comin' bimeby—"

But Stella waited to hear no more. She fled in dastardly cowardice from the old crone's tongue; and when the other three followed her, laughing, she was already mounted, and going rapidly down the mountain.

The storm rolled away down the valley in advance of them, leaving in its track many a trace of its fury in the shape of broken and up-rooted trees; but in good time they reached Oaklands,

bringing their trout with them.

CHAPTER XXV

A few afternoons later Stella took her easel and paints out to a shady spot on the lawn to paint a scene from a corner which she especially admired.

Weston had pleaded for another "music les-

son," but she had laughingly declined—

"No, no; you are proficient already, as Mark Twain's Arkansas girl, at her second rendition of 'The Battle of Prague,' was perfect—in a backward direction,' adding, "I must paint this picture to remind me of Oaklands when I shall be far away."

"Then let me help you paint it."

"What! a composite production of genius?"

"Yes," he laughed, "just as David Copper-field's book was a joint production by himself and Dora. I will hold the brushes for you," which he did, waiting patiently beside her, now and then making some suggestions, asking some absurd question, or uttering some droll criticism, while occasionally he would say something so apposite as to convince her that he knew more of the art than he acknowledged.

Finally, he said,

"Don't you think it time to stop now for a walk? It will be too late if you wait longer."

"I have to write a letter to the Mother Superior of Santa Maria this afternoon," she objected.

"Oh! that can wait till to-morrow. We have just enough time to go and return before sunset."

"Very well; and as you have already been so helpful, I will allow you to take in the easel."

"Humph! I had hoped to take in the artist."

"The artist will never allow herself to be taken in," she retorted, laughing gaily.

When they were starting out for the walk, he

turned in a new direction.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To Chinquapin Bottom, to see what are the prospects for the autumn crop."

"How will that knowledge affect you? Both

you and myself will be far away."

"Where will either of us be?" he asked, earnestly regarding her.

"Where, indeed? To me everything is so un-

certain that it is difficult to forecast."

"But you cannot go away without some plan. That would not be like yourself," he answered, perplexed.

"My plans are not perfected; therefore I will wait till they are so before announcing them."

The conversation took a rather sombre turn, until, perceiving the trend, he turned it into a lighter channel, as pointing toward the little stream he remarked.

"Down there in that small green meadow I first heard the sound of your voice, and beheld you as, surrounded by your dusky fauns and satyrs, you enacted the rôle of wood-nymph. Did you ever discover that it was I who so rudely

crashed down among you and scattered you all

like partridges before the hunter?"

"Was it you, really?" she cried. "I never suspected it. And where is my poor old banjo?" she asked suddenly.

"Oh! I kept it as my only trophy of that

morning's sport," he answered, laughing.

"And that is why you presented me with a new one?"

"Yes; exchange is no robbery, you know."

"Certainly I was no loser by the transaction; but Aunt Kate would have had a much more difficult task in getting me to appear in your august presence if I had known."

"But for that little incident I should never have known your real self, perhaps," he con-

tinued.

"You think you know me now, do you?" she asked, looking at him and smiling.

"Yes, though you have changed much since

then."

"For better or worse?"

"I can't tell until our present interview is over. Let us sit down here on this log and talk over that time, so far away, yet so recent in years."

He made place for her; but a sudden shrinking seized her, an almost uncontrollable impulse

to turn and flee.

"Sit down, please; I have something to say to you," and he caught her hand, drawing her down compellingly beside him.

She turned toward him with a forced laugh

and an effort to speak jestingly; but there was on his face an expression so masterful that the

words died on her lips.

"Stella," he said resolutely, "do you not guess why I have brought you to this spot? Do you remember a question I asked you here three years ago?"

He paused, but there was no response, and he

went on,

"It was no doubt premature and imprudent to ask such a question of so young a girl, almost a child in heart—but I was in earnest then and in more deadly earnest now, since the lovable child has developed into the adorable woman. From that time I have never ceased to bear your image in my heart, and to look forward to the day when here, in this very spot, I might, in all honor and fairness, renew that question. On your graduating eve, unseen myself, I saw you, and my eyes were dazzled by the rich fulfillment of your early promise. Suddenly there rushed into my heart the crushing fear lest you had outgrown even the remembrance of that other hour and of myself. Was it so?"

Again he paused for some word or sign from her; but she sat motionless, pale and trembling. It was the first declaration of love to which she had ever listened, save that question he had here asked her when they had been interrupted, and to which there had been afterward no re-

verting.

And he,—whom in her childish ignorance she had deemed hero, "fit for song and story,"—did

he now when placed before the knightly mirror give back a true or dubious reflection? How could she know?

Weston could see from her pale cheek and trembling lip how much she was agitated, and a

great fear took possession of him.

Anxiously he bent his head to look into her half-averted face, and in tender pity for her trepidation he took her cold fingers in his own

and pressed them firmly.

"What is it, Stella? Have I too rudely broken to you the story of my long-cherished hopes? If you are unprepared to answer now, I will wait; though Heaven knows how weary of waiting I am. Only do not forbid all hope, for I cannot, I will not relinquish that."

Once more he paused for her to speak. She drew a deep breath as if to relieve her laboring heart, then summoning courage, turned and looked at him with a glance in which a world of

mingled feeling seemed struggling.

"I scarcely know how to phrase what I would wish to say to you," she murmured, "but I will at least endeavor to be just to you, in explaining my sentiments in so far as I understand them myself." She paused to gather composure, and

then went on,

"Since that day, when you unintentionally killed my pet and we together buried poor Dido; when you spoke so kindly and sympathetically to me,—as I had not been spoken to since my father's death,—you took to me the place of an elder brother. You alone understood me; you

alone saw that I was isolated and ill at ease in my aunt's home. You may possibly remember that Sunday at the country church and the storm that burst upon us on our return. You may remember how gloriously the sunshine broke, after the storm, over the rejoicing landscape. Such a change had come into my life, and a revelation as of a new world descended upon me in the few weeks following. Then came Rita; and when you became suddenly cold and distant to me, when I saw you bending to her, to catch every whisper and smile, when I heard you sing to her, calling her your 'Star of Hope,' never turning to look at the credulous girl whose heart was breaking—that heart seemed to die, and life ceased for a while to hold any beauty and joy. You have recently told me the cause, but oh! the time was so long! Then when I was suddenly snatched away and sent off to school I endeavored to banish all thought of you, and after a while only ambition seemed to hold sway and to urge me on toward that ideal of feminine excellence which you had held up to me. When I carried off the first honors of the school for a few hours I deemed myself happy; but the thought of my disappointed competitor arose to mar my happiness, bringing with it a strange misgiving which haunted me all that night, and haunts me still.

"When I saw you I felt as if there were a protecting power near me to ward off trouble, and I was able to rejoice in your friendship again. Since then I have recovered my natural

self, except now and then, when I have spells of

misgiving.

"A few afternoons ago, as we stood on the bridge, if you had told me then what you have told me now, I think I might have been less discouraging. But just now, when you began to speak, an iron hand seemed clutching my heart, stilling its beating and feeling. Again, that awful sense of impending misfortune overpowered me. Oh! Mr. Weston, what is it?" and with a strong shudder she buried her face in her hands.

Weston, inexpressibly shocked by this sudden seizure, could only attempt to soothe her by

endearing words.

"My own darling!" he cried, imprisoning both her hands in his. "Let me indeed be to you a protecting power. Come to my heart indeed, and with my life I will protect you from harm. But this presentiment of evil can proceed only from overwork and strained nerves. Marry me, dearest, when Will and Nellie are married, and I will at once take you abroad. In the art-treasures of Old-World galleries your artistic soul shall revel in all that is beautiful and attractive. Forget these nervous fancies. Beneath Italian skies we will float upon the waters of the Neapolitan bay, or, shaded by the silk curtains of our gondola, we will thread the watery ways of Venice. Upon snow-capped Alpine heights we will see fair lands spread out like pictures far beneath us, or sail by moonlight down the blue waters of the Danube and past the ruined castles of the Rhine."

He paused, for Stella was regarding him with

wide eyes of amazement.

"Are we both laboring under some mysterious "Wahnsinn"?" she asked, smiling with deep sadness at his extravagant promises.

Recalled to reality from his aerial flight, he

too smiled and answered,

"You perhaps think me visionary and irresponsible; but only give me the privilege of living for you, and no difficulties shall daunt, no heights be inaccessible."

"No, my dear friend, I am too inexperienced, too untried in the problems of life to promise anything now. Let me go away and battle with the stern realities, and learn to know myself."

"And is this the utmost you can promise? Must I starve on this little crumb of hope?" he asked in bitterest disappointment.

"This is absolutely all that I can promise

now."

The sun's red disk had suddenly been cut in twain by a black bar of cloud. Weston silently watched it until the whole orb had sunk below the bar and seemed resting on the verge of the distant horizon. Then without a word he rose, and both still silent, they turned their faces homeward.

Her heart was inexpressibly pained at sight of his dejection, and on the homeward way she endeavored to divert him by lighter talk, but he replied mostly in monosyllables. When they entered the hall it was quite dusk, but still light enough for her to perceive a letter

for her lying on a table. She took it up.

"A letter for me! By the number of postmarks it must have traveled over half the United States. I will go up and read it before tea."

She ascended several steps and then paused, looked back at Weston, and sighed. She saw the hopelessness of his attitude and the unconscious wistfulness of his whole expression. Her heart melted at sight of it and something long dormant awoke in her breast. Her heart gave a great bound, stirred to sudden life, and a tide of that early love, increasing with the years, swept overwhelmingly athwart her being.

She returned to him. The semi-light was still strong enough for him to read the love-light in

her luminous eyes.

"Believe me," she whispered, "I am not insensible to the priceless gift of a generous and

constant love. Perhaps—"

He waited to hear no more. He had read the message of hope in her eyes, and in a great rush of exultant feeling he had caught her to his heart.

"Some one is coming," she whispered, struggling to release herself from those strong detaining arms; and she sprang away, and ran laughing softly up the stair.

CHAPTER XXVI

Twice had the tea-bell been rung, and yet Stella, usually so punctual, had not appeared. Mrs. Haughton dispatched Queenie, the waitress, to summon her.

A few minutes later every one was much startled by loud outcries; and the woman, terrified, came half tumbling down the steps.

"She's dead; Miss Stella's dead!" she

shrieked, over and over.

A simultaneous rush was made for the staircase, only Weston and Will remaining at the foot, where they awaited explanation of the alarm, the few minutes of suspense which followed appearing to Weston as a century.

Then Nellie came down weeping, and told them that Stella had been found prone upon the floor of her room, to all appearances lifeless; but that since then she had opened her eyes,

only to go off again into another swoon.

The horror and dismay of Weston were pitiable. Will grasped his hand and tried to utter comforting words, for Weston had already

told him of his happiness.

In a short while Dr. Murray appeared. Stella had recovered consciousness only sufficient to look into the physician's face, with the most piteous expression he had ever beheld on human countenance. Then she fainted again.

To his inquiries as to her previous state of

health and spirits there appeared no reasonable explanation of the collapse. The only response to questioning of the patient was strong shudderings and inarticulate moans, so that the doctor was forced to conclude that she could not

comprehend the import of his questions.

When he learned that she had been well enough to take a walk with Weston at sunset he immediately sought out the latter. Weston made no concealment of anything that had transpired between Stella and himself that afternoon, telling of her strange seizure after he had declared his love, and he especially enlightened the physician as to her long and unremitting course of study.

"Ah!" exclaimed Dr. Murray, with a few lurid objurgations upon female schools in general, "that explains the whole matter. It is due to mental strain—too frequently the case. I appreciate, my dear sir, your feelings and am sorry to say anything discouraging; but in the present case the greatest quiet and care must be secured, or very serious results may follow. The young lady is threatened with brain fever "

"Do you consider that her life is in much

danger?" asked Weston.

Dr. Murray placed his hand on the young

man's shoulder.

"I always make it a rule to be truthful in such cases. As I have said, the utmost caution for a few days is absolutely necessary. Her life, even, may be in danger for a few days, and after that her mind may temporarily fail."

"My God! and am I the cause?" he moaned, his face grown white and drawn. His words had deeper meaning than the physician suspected, and he leaned heavily against the wall.

"No, no, my dear young friend; do not blame yourself in the least. It would have occurred in a very few days anyhow; but will you attend at once to having a nurse summoned?" and he gave the address of one. Weston hurried out and sent the telegram.

The doctor had diagnosed his case logically; but if he had read the letter which had floated under the bed when Stella fell, and which Queenie swept up and burned with the trash next morning, he would have been enlightened. Nevertheless, he had not exaggerated the young girl's danger.

As the night wore on Dr. Murray reported little change in the patient's condition. She was still lethargic, with occasional mutterings of delirium, and he determined to remain till the nurse should arrive.

And Weston, too utterly wretched to think of retiring, or even remaining in his room, paced the hall or portico through the long night, frequently inquiring about Stella's condition as the doctor or some member of the family appeared.

The dull gray of the early morning found him with head bowed upon the window-sill of the sitting-room, till the joyous chorus of the awakening birds sent him sadly to his own room.

A silent, fervent hand-clasp was Will's morning greeting, and the gathering at the breakfast table was a sad one.

There was a great lifting of responsibility when the nurse came and at once took her place

beside the sick girl.

Several days passed uneventfully; but the patient did not yield to treatment as the doctor had hoped. In her delirium one oft-repeated name puzzled him. "Mauna Loa," "Mauna Loa," uttered sometimes entreatingly, sometimes in wildest agony.

Dr. Murray mentioned this to Weston, asking

if he could enlighten him.

"Why should the name of a Hawaiian volcano have taken such possession of her mind?" he asked. Weston explained that it was the sobriquet of her rival.

"Ah! that — school business!" and he

shook his head savagely.

It was well, indeed, that a professional nurse had been summoned; for hours lengthened to days before Stella regained entire consciousness; and in the mean time she had become as weak as a child. None but the trained strength of Mary Godwin could so gently have lifted and turned her, so unweariedly have watched beside her.

The preparations for Nellie's nuptials were still progressing, although the latter declared she would not be married until Stella was pronounced convalescent.

When the patient was well enough to compre-

hend, Weston gathered each day the fairest and most fragrant of her favorite flowers and sent them in his name—always with some tender message when Nellie was the bearer; but they appeared to afford little pleasure to the recipient, who would lay them on her pillow and weep silently over them. Then Weston would be deeply pained that there returned to him no message, nor even word of remembrance.

One day, when she had been allowed to sit up a little while, and her mind was perfectly clear, he wrote a few words of loving entreaty for an answer, and placed the missive in among the flowers where she might easily perceive it.

This set her to thinking deeply. Oh! how she dreaded to see him again, though her heart was almost breaking now for the love of him; for she recognized only too well that without any explanation whatever she must say goodby to him forever, turning her steps anywhither in the world than where he might be. The agony of it had made her ill and had kept her so. As the time slowly went by she realized more and more fully the trying ordeal through which she must inevitably pass, and she grew more reluctant each day to be taken down stairs. But the doctor insisted, fearing lest she sink into settled melancholia.

Frequently Mary Godwin was awakened in the night by the despairing moans of the tortured girl, who would cry out,

"Oh! I cannot endure it; I cannot endure

it!"

Mary went at such time to her side, and

begged to know the cause of the anguish.

"Tell it all to your Mary, dear; and ease your mind and heart of your trouble," she would say to the despairing sufferer, who long desisted, until at last, feeling that she must have the helpful sympathy of a human creature, or go mad, she confided to the nurse, under oath of eternal secrecy, the cause of all her illness and agony. So insistent and exacting was she as to this oath, that Mary, against her better judgment, was compelled to give it.

After this confidence the patient appeared to feel more comfort, and having her mind in a measure relieved by having another to help sus-

tain her, she improved more rapidly.

Very fragile, white, and spiritless she looked on the morning when Dr. Murray, in spite of her remonstrances, insisted on her being taken down stairs and deposited in a great arm-chair, where all, one by one, as the doctor had suggested, came to greet and congratulate her. Upon Weston alone had Dr. Murray laid restrictions, saying,

"Don't go in till she asks about you, or shows some concern for you. Better still, if you can excite a little irritation at your tardiness." And hard as it was for him to be the only one excluded, he was constrained to acquiesce.

When all had been in, Stella began to glance nervously around, fearing each moment he would come; then would sink back upon her cushions, infinitely relieved when he did not

appear.

After an hour she was taken back to her room. The next day she was again brought down. After all had talked to her a little and gone out, except Nellie, Weston passed the open door. The quasi-engagement was known to the whole family and by common consent it was arranged that he should see her alone.

Nellie said,

"I will go now, dear; there is another visitor who wishes to see you to-day. May I tell him you will receive him?"

Stella shrank back affrighted.

"No, no! I cannot see him to-day. I cannot, indeed."

Weston was inexpressibly pained; but the next day, when she was alone, he passed and saw her sitting in the most profound dejection, her glance fixed upon the floor. Her face was turned partially from him, and it was not till he had stooped over and softly kissed her on the brow that she became aware of his presence.

"Dearest," he said in accents of profound tenderness; and she looked up with a startled and terrified glance. But oh! in that glance

what hopeless misery!

"Dearest," he repeated, and made a movement to take her hand, but she drew back and averted her face.

He was cut to the heart, and did not know how to proceed. Then he besought her to tell him the cause of her coldness, her repulsion. By the memory of their former friendship he besought her to tell him why she treated him so.

"Because—because—" she faltered, "everything must now forever be at an end between us."

It was in vain that he urged; she could only entreat piteously,

"Please leave me now."

"Yes, darling; but you will let me see you again to-morrow? You will not break my heart

then, as you are doing now, will you?"

At his appealing words she hid her face in her hands and the hot tears fell trickling through her slender, almost transparent fingers.

"Go—go!" was all she could utter.

He rose, kissed the back of her hand, then went out, his face ashen in its anguish.

CHAPTER XXVII

After this Weston came and went like the others. He never attempted a private word with Stella, for the doctor had said,

"Try to pass it over cheerfully. She will

come round in good time."

A week before the wedding, Rita came, brighter, more vivacious, even more charming than ever; seeking to make herself useful, or agreeable as the case might be, and always succeeding admirably.

"I had expected to hear, on my return, the title Mrs. prefixed to your name," said Will, after greeting her. He had always admired her extravagantly, and now wondered that no princely man had succeeded in gaining her love.

Rita laughed with the confidence born of con-

quest.

"I suppose you will despair of ever seeing me a matron. But I assure you, though you have known me long, I am not entirely passée."

Then she continued more seriously,

"I am not quite twenty-two yet, and I maintain that every girl who so elects should be allowed to enjoy her single-blessedness for a full quarter of a century; especially now since medical scientists claim that human life may be greatly prolonged. However," said she, turning to Weston and speaking in a low tone,

"I rather expect to share my freedom with some one next winter."

This confidential communication surprised him for the moment; but after meditating upon it he thought he understood. His attitude toward her on her first visit had appeared to many as lover-like. She herself had perhaps so construed it, not knowing of his attachment to Stella, and being no coquette she was too generous to cause useless suffering. He took an early occasion to tell her of his half engagement and of the shadow which had fallen on his hopes.

She did not see Stella until the next day as the latter sat listless near the open window of the sitting-room, through which floated in the breeze, laden with the perfume of flowers, sporting with the loose ringlets of her hair.

Rita had fluttered in as softly as the breeze, and now taking the thin cheeks between both hands kissed her tenderly several times before

speaking.

"Dear girl, I am so grieved to hear that you have been ill, but delighted to find you convalescent," said she. Then she took the invalid's delicate hand, and stroking it softly, made no further allusion to her illness; but chattered on brightly, seeking to beguile her thoughts from herself.

Pausing a little, lest she weary her listener, she leaned out of the window, and breaking a spray of jasmine fastened it in the bosom of the pretty matinee jacket which Stella was wear-

ing.

"Sweets to the sweet.' You look like one of these pure white blossoms yourself. It is my favorite flower; don't you like the perfume? But if you love flowers and birds, you must come down and spend the winter with me. Ah! I remember now your pet doves, Ceyx and Alcyone. I must hear something of them. In my Magnolia-Land you can enjoy both birds and flowers all winter; and it will give us all such pleasure to minister to your comfort."

Thus she talked on, hoping to cheer and divert; but her listener could only faintly murmur her appreciation of the other's kindness and then lapse into thoughtful silence; which Rita, observing, went out, and beckoning Weston, whispered, "Go in now; I think she feels

your absence."

She did look up, in a half-expectant manner, and a faint smile of welcome hovered for a moment upon her lips as she held out a trembling hand. He raised it almost as carefully as if it had been some delicate piece of alabaster which a touch might shatter, so fragile did it look, and kissed it tenderly. Yet he did not relinquish it till she made a movement to withdraw it.

Almost brightly she began to talk of Rita; talked of her beauty, her wit, her goodness, and of her winsome ways.

Even as she talked he saw how she was striving to ignore his interest in herself and to rekindle his admiration of Rita—to transfer, as

it were, his affections from herself to Rita.

It cost him a great pang to observe this, while she was thinking. "Oh! if he would forget me and turn again to her, how gladly for the sake of his happiness would I be forever effaced from his memory!"

Weston leaned toward her.

"Darling," said he, "don't you think that, supported by my arm, you might take a turn or two on the shaded veranda?"

"Oh, no! do not ask me," she cried, sinking

away from him.

He mistook look and action for aversion to

himself, and a groan broke from his lips.

"Oh! Stella darling, why have you conceived such a dislike for me?" and rising hastily he walked to the opposite window to conceal his unutterable anguish. Presently he came back to her, looking white and haggard.

"Do you sincerely wish me never to mention to you again the subject nearest my heart?" he

asked in a low, strangely altered voice.

She raised her eyes to his, and with a look in which all of earthly joy seemed expiring, she

answered slowly and deliberately,

"Yes, I wish it; forget me; and may you be as happy with—with some one else as I would have you, and as you deserve to be. With one who—who—"

She could say no more, but dropped her face in her hands in unutterable anguish.

"So be it, then; I will persecute you no more."

The voice was no more the vibrant, cheery voice of Weston; but sounded cold, and hard, and desolate. The next moment he had placed his hand as if in benediction on her head, and then went softly out, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Brightly shone the sun on Nellie's wedding-day; and though no silver bells rang out in merry peal upon the air, never had the flowers bloomed more profusely nor the birds carolled more joyously from all the tree-tops than upon the present occasion.

Not one individual in the household, white or colored, but sought to perform for her some loving service; even Weston assisted Ethel with the flowers, smiling sometimes in bitter irony as he thought upon his own blighted hopes.

Then at last the bride stood arrayed for the ceremony. Her mother had struggled to repress her emotion for fear of making her daughter's eyes red with sympathetic tears; but when she saw how really lovely and elegant the latter looked, maternal pride could hold out no longer and there was an unmistakable moisture in her eyes as she lifted the bridal veil and kissed her, saying warningly,

"Don't cry, my dear; it will spoil your pretty

eyes."

But tears of happiness do not mar beauty like those of sorrow, and when the bride was conducted into the room where the bridegroom was waiting, and the rose-hue on her cheek deepened at sight of his brilliantly happy eyes, she was as fair a bride as need gladden the heart of any lover. On account of Stella's illness the wedding was private, and when the clergyman was gone,

Will turned to Mrs. Haughton.

"My dear Madam, I am now your much-tobe-congratulated son-in-law, but I am no longer your cousin, as you have supposed. Here," said he, taking Weston by the arm and whirling him around to face her, "here is the Will Willoughby who, with his father, visited you years ago."

"I fail to comprehend you, Will," replied Mrs. Haughton, regarding him coldly. "I might reasonably assume that all practical jokes and masquerades had been laid aside as unworthy of an occasion so sacred as this. Pray explain yourself — Mr. Willoughby — or

whatever your name may be."

"My name is undoubtedly what I have been hitherto called, but this gentleman has as much right to the name as I have," answered Will,

smiling.

"Oh! then," said Mrs. Haughton freezingly, but bewildered, "you give me to understand you have a double."

"In name, yes. In short, Madam, he is my father's nephew, my more than cousin, and we both bear the name of our paternal grandfather, William Willoughby, whom you knew and who with this Will visited you here at Oaklands fifteen years ago."

This explanation caused a deal of exclamation among the cousins and Mrs. Haughton herself; for though the latter was deeply offended at the deception which she deemed had been put upon her, yet she succeeded very creditably in concealing her mortification under a smiling exterior as she shook her finger at the two young men for their "naughtiness."

"But I cannot understand," said she, "the

occasion for such a deception."

Then Will laughingly explained that his cousin during his former visit had fallen a victim to Marie's youthful charms, and desired to discover, after he reached marriageable age, if she would prove as charming to a poor companion as she had been to the heir-expectant of

great wealth.

Afterward he related apart to Mrs. Haughton, with Stella near in her armchair, how he, the orphaned nephew, had been received by his uncle and cousin with open arms, and how his and Weston's souls had from the first been, like those of David and Jonathan, knit together; and how, though he had come to them penniless, he had, at Weston's insistence, been made a co-heir. He told how, since both of them bore the same name, it had been necessary at college to differentiate them, and because he was from the East, while his cousin was of the West, he himself had been dubbed by the students Easton and the other Will had ever since been called Weston. Therefore, when they had come to her home he had simply retained his own name, and Weston had kept the name by which he was popularly known.

Weston now laughingly shook hands around.

with his three cousins, reminding them of former escapades together; but Ethel, through shame, rather held aloof, for under any other than her mother's training she would have been a much more natural, lovable woman.

Weston now walked away with Nellie toward Stella's chair, and Mrs. Haughton, with a world of significance, whispered to her eldest daugh-

ter.

"Oh, Marie, Marie, if we could only have known!"

Stella was leaning back with averted face. It was only after he had spoken and she failed to

reply that they saw she had fainted.

Beckoning Mary Godwin they took her into the sitting-room and laid her on a sofa; and going for restoratives, left Weston momentarily alone with her. She opened her eyes, and, not really seeing him at all, murmured in a tone of great sadness and bewilderment.

"Not Weston, but some one I never knew?"

"Yes, yes; dear love; always Weston to you," he cried, kissing her pale lips in heart-breaking farewell as they came to take her to her room.

She was entirely conscious some hours later when Will and Nellie came to say good-by; and, as she felt Nellie's tears and kisses on her face, she wondered if he were going to leave her without one word; for she had no recollection of anything after the conclusion of Will's story.

Then after Nellie came Rita to say farewell; and as the invalid heard carriages rolling away

in the night she was reminded of that other sorrowful night so long ago when she had lain and listened with anguished heart to the same sound.

The next day Mary Godwin placed in her hand a note hastily written by Weston before

leaving.

"My own darling," it ran, "I promised you that I would no more persecute you with unwelcome words of love; but I am leaving now not knowing if I shall ever have the happiness of seeing you again; therefore pardon me for the few words I shall write.

"I know that persons suffering from your malady are subject to sudden revulsions of feeling; and, almost against hope, I am trusting that your late aversion may be due to some such cause. This faint hope now induces me to say that, if after you shall be restored to your former health and spirits you ever feel any revival of tenderness for me, one little word 'Come' will instantly bring me to your side.

"In this hope, permit him who has so faithfully cherished your image, to wait; so that when you grow older and shall recognize the value of an unswerving devotion you may possibly relent toward him, and crown his years of

waiting.

"May God bless, protect, and preserve you is the repeated prayer of

"Yours now, and ever, "Weston."

From this time Stella continued to convalesce. She had formed her plan for the future; and when a week later Mary Godwin left, her charge smiled almost brightly as she said: "I will join you soon."

CHAPTER XIX

Weston had accompanied the bridal pair as far as the Oaklands station, intending to take a later train in another direction. As he was sitting lonely after their departure, a prey to very sorrowful reflections, it suddenly occurred to him that in the bustle of preparations for the wedding the mail had not been thought of, and possibly there might be letters for him.

Upon application he received several, among them one forwarded from Paris, and addressed

"Richard Stockton, Esqr.,
"1817, Rue de la ——,
"Paris,
"France."

At sight of this superscription he became suddenly deeply interested; and unwarrantable as it may appear, he unhesitatingly broke the seal and read as follows:

"Convent of Santa Maria of The Doves, "July 10th, 19—.

"Mr. Richard Stockton.

"My Dear Sir: It is with inexpressible pain that I have decided to lay before you a most surprising and distressing circumstance in regard to your niece.

"Up to the time of her departure from our institution she was the best beloved as well as one of the most highly respected young ladies

ever educated within these venerable walls. In every respect she had been a shining example to other students, and you may therefore judge how like a thunderbolt fell upon us the startling revelation which came just one hour after her departure from us. On opening my desk that morning to distribute some moneys to several young ladies who were about to leave, I discovered, to my horror, as well as consternation, that it was all gone.

"To save time and confusion I had, on the previous day, rolled up in separate packages and marked such sums as I was to return to them after all the expenses of the session had been settled. I had done this in the presence of several girls, among whom I distinctly remem-

bered your niece.

"Upon leaving my office I had thought it unnecessary to lock my desk, as I had taken especial pains to see that the windows were fastened, and I always lock my door on leaving

the office.

"During the exercises of that evening I needed some article from the office, and being occupied, I requested Stella Hope—our beloved and trusted Stella—to take the key to the door and bring me the article in question. No one else except myself had the key that entire afternoon, or evening. Also, it was of a peculiar construction, and there was no duplicate.

"I had no occasion to look into my desk again

till next morning.

"The money, though quite considerable, was

a mere trifle in comparison with the awful sus-

picion which forced itself upon me.

"Several young ladies had seen me give the key to your niece, and when the whole matter had been investigated one of them declared that she had seen Stella go into the trunk-room and slip something mysteriously into a music-portfolio.

"Now the Sisters always pack the trunks; and such being the case, I felt no hesitation in unlocking Miss Hope's trunk which, containing books and music, was to be sent by express.

"Imagine my distress and astonishment when, opening the portfolio, I discovered several packages of the girls' money; but the unmarked money of my own was not to be found. Of course the supposition could be no other than that she had taken that money with her.

"I did not wish the matter to be made public, so I requested all the girls who knew of it not to divulge it, exacting from each a solemn promise to that effect. I told them there might be a mistake and I wanted to investigate further. Ah! why did I ever place temptation in her way? Freely would I give my right arm rather than have done so.

"For many days I prayed for heavenly guidance, and then I wrote to Stella. I implored her, for the sake of her soul, to confess the whole truth about it; and if she would return all the money I would have the whole sisterhood pray for her restoration to grace.

"She never replied to my letter, which, alas!

was proof positive that she had committed the theft and was impenitent. Such being the case, there was no alternative but to write to you—her guardian and uncle—that you may act in

such wise as you think best.

"Never in my experience have I had anything to so pain me. We will all intercede for her with the Holy Mother, praying that extenuating circumstances may be brought to light, and that she may be shielded from temptation in the future.

"Thanking you for your patronage and deeply regretting the unfortunate termination of your niece's brilliant career with us, I am,

"With profound respect,

"Maria Agnes Josepha,
"Mother Superior of Santa Maria of the

Doves."

When Weston had read to the end the letter fell from his hands, and for a few minutes he sat stunned, as one in a catalepsy. Then, with a mighty rush, the blood surged through his veins, and his brain seemed on fire.

"My God!" he burst out, oblivious of his

surroundings and the presence of the agent.

The latter glanced toward him with concern.

"No ill news, I hope, sir?"

"Yes, a great misfortune to one of my friends." He got up and walked unsteadily from the room.

Out upon the platform the cool night air upon his forehead was like a breath from heaven; and he stood there looking blankly up to the stars, endeavoring to comprehend something that was slowly taking shape in his mind.

In an instant it all came to him like a flash.

"My own precious darling! No wonder you felt a presentiment of coming evil, and that your reason succumbed under the weight of such a calamity! Ah! I see now so clearly that you have been made the victim of a diabolical plot. Your disappointed rival, the letter waiting for you after our last walk. Ah! and the bank-notes that fell across your hands at the piano—dear, beautiful hands! We have all been fools not to see that you were crushed

by very great and real trouble.

"Shall I go back and tell her that I know all, and will see her righted or perish in the attempt? But that would be to acknowledge I have been presumptuously acting the benefactor under the name of her uncle who may still be living. Then she would feel humiliated by the discovery that she owes her education to the charity of an alien. Besides, I wish no sentiment of gratitude to mingle with the nature of her regard for me; and I know her sensitive, high-spirited character too well to flatter myself that she will ever marry me or any one else with this stigma upon her name.

"Ah! miserable instrument that I have been in bringing this calamity upon her! But I swear to spend my life and whole fortune, if necessary, in tracing up and bringing to confession the wretch who has destroyed her happiness. O that I might take her burden upon my shoul-

ders!"

CHAPTER XXX

Within a week a carriage containing two men drew up before the entrance of the Convent of Santa Maria. A few minutes later they were in

conversation with the Mother Superior.

There is no difficulty about recognizing one of them, for it is Weston. The other is a famous detective, who has been engaged by Weston to work up this case and bring the real culprit to

confession or to justice.

The Mother Superior was made acquainted with their suspicions as to the real perpetrator, and, her eyes opened to the motive, she was now aiding them in bringing about a reparation of the great wrong that had been done an innocent girl.

When the conversation came to an end the de-

tective said:

"Will you be so kind, Mother, as to show us the situation of your office where the money was kept?"

With obliging readiness she led the way. When they had entered, and the detective had

glanced all around the office, he said:

"Are you sure, Mother, that no one had the key that day except yourself and Miss Hope?"

"Quite sure," she answered decidedly.

"And you had bolted the windows and locked the door?"

"Yes, carefully."

"But you had left the key to the desk in the lock?"

"Yes; for with the windows and the door locked I could not possibly foresee the chance of any one's getting to my desk," she answered.

"And to your certain knowledge there is no

other key of the kind in the institution?"

"None. I had the lock made for the purpose of frustrating any such attempt," and she showed him an unusual key.

"Was it known to the young ladies that you were in the habit of keeping money in that

desk?"

"Yes; it was to this office that I always summoned them for any monetary transaction."

"Did Miss Morna Lea leave soon after Miss

Hope?"

"No; she remained here till I could find a situation for her."

"Was she in the office the day you marked the money?"

"Yes, with half a dozen others."

"Was it she who professed to see Miss Hope mysteriously put something in her trunk that night before retiring?"

"Yes."

"Did any one else see her do this?"

"No; at least no one said so."

"Ah!" That was all the comment he made.

Then after a pause he said:

"I hope you will both pardon and assist me if I now proceed to make some investigations for myself."

- "Certainly; I will do everything I can; for I would give much to have our dear pupil exonerated."
- "Thank you," and he walked to the window and looked out.
- "To what rooms does this upper veranda lead?" he asked.
- "On one side, to the music-rooms; on the other, to the art-rooms."
 - "Did Miss Lea take music?"
 - "Yes."
- "Where is the dormitory situated in which Miss Lea was accustomed to sleep?"
- "On the third floor, immediately above the music-rooms."
- "Then there is easy access to the music-room in which she was accustomed to practice?"
- "Yes; the staircase from the dormitory ends almost at the door of the music-room."
- "And the distance of that music-room from here?"
- "Just three doors away, and looks out upon the veranda."
- "And where is the trunk-room in which Miss Hope had her trunk?"
 - "On the fourth floor, above the dormitory."
- "Will you kindly conduct me to the music-room in question?"

"Certainly."

When he was in it he walked to the one window, opened it, and stepped out upon the veranda, saying to the Mother and Weston:

"Now, will you kindly return to the office and bolt the windows?"

They did as requested, he remaining outside

in front of one of the windows.

As soon as they had been bolted, he took from his pocket an ordinary knife, opened the longest blade, inserted it between the upper sash and the lower, and without the slightest difficulty turned the bolt, raised the sash and stepped in.

The Mother Superior was astonished and horrified at the ease with which he had invaded

her sanctum.

The detective only smiled at her presupposed immunity from burglarious entrance, and requested to be taken without delay to the dormitory and trunk-room. When he had reached the latter he drew out his watch and said:

"It has taken exactly three minutes from the time of entering the music-room. I suppose Miss Lea had ample time for accomplishing her purpose after leaving the auditorium where the prizes were being distributed?"

"I should judge so, since she was alone for

at least two hours."

"When she gave information about the placing by Miss Hope of something in her trunk, had she looked into that trunk herself?"

"Oh, no; I suppose not. I searched the trunk myself, but she directed me where to look, which

was between the sheets of a music-book."

"Did it not occur to you as rather singular that she should be so accurately acquainted with the place of concealment?"

It did not occur to me at the time, so strongly did suspicion point to Miss Hope; but now I confess it does."

"Were the trunks of the young ladies locked

at all times?"

"Oh, no; it is against our regulations for the trunks to be locked at any time while they are under our care."

"Was there any other article not belonging to Miss Hope found in her trunk, when it was

searched?"

"Nothing whatever, except books, music, and a few articles of winter clothing."

"Are such trunks usually sent by express

after the owner has returned home?"

"Yes, usually."

"Did Miss Hope know this?"

"Yes; all the girls know it and prefer it, since being excess baggage it would only be bothersome and no advantage to take it along with them."

"Have you ever heard from the young lady

-Miss Hope-since she left?"

"No; and that very circumstance increased my suspicions," and she told what she had written to Stella.

It was at this point that Weston, who had been a silent but an interested listener, now explained the cause of her sudden illness and her subsequent inability to write.

The kind Mother appeared much affected, and expressed many wishes for the clearing up of the matter and Stella's ultimate exoneration.

Then the detective, turning to both, said: "Make your minds easy on that score. I would stake my life on her innocence; and, in due course of time, I promise you the confessions of the wicked and revengeful girl who has done Miss Hope this wrong. But give me time; these things often require to be worked out slowly."

To Weston, who had never for a moment entertained the faintest suspicion of Stella's innocence, this announcement, while it gave hope, also brought some discouragement on account of the delay implied; but the Mother Superior expressed heart-felt hope that the affair might result in the vindication of Stella, even if it took

years to establish her innocence.

Upon request she gave the residence, employment, and address of Morna Lea. Then the two men went away, bidding a grateful farewell to the Mother, whom they promised to acquaint with the progress of the case. They both felt much encouraged at the very useful information they had received.

CHAPTER XXXI

It is now late in September, and Stella is sitting upon the porch at Oaklands with head leaned meditatively against one of its columns. She has in a measure recovered her health, but the elasticity of her mind and the buoyancy of her spirits were gone; for the severance of her engagement with Weston weighed heavily upon her.

She held in her hand an open letter, but her eyes were fixed upon the distant horizon, and she saw nothing in the world around her, nor heard the step of Mrs. Haughton who, at that moment, came out to enjoy the evening breeze and the fine sunset. It was not until she spoke that Stella became aware of her presence. Then she turned and said:

"Aunt Kate, I have for some time been wishing to speak with you about my plans, but have waited to hear from my uncle before laying them before you. I will be glad to discuss them, or rather my plan—since I have but one—if you will give me a few minutes of your time now."

"Certainly, my dear, as much as you wish. Leisure is more abundant with me than anything else since my dear Nellie left me; and now that Ethel is also away I have more of it than is altogether agreeable. What is your plan?"

"Aunt Kate, you know that I have always been desirous of being self-supporting. I wish to be a burden to no one, and as I am unacquainted with the financial condition of my uncle I prefer to do something for my own maintenance, and also to repay you for the expense and worry I have been to you. I wish to enter at once into a course of training to become a professional nurse."

Had a bomb suddenly exploded at Mrs. Haughton's feet she could not have looked more astounded and aghast. Then a hot flush of anger suffused her cheek and she hastily ex-

claimed:

"Absurd and preposterous! I forbid you ever to mention such a Quixotic idea again. What would your uncle, who has been so kind to you, what would your teachers and school

friends say?"

"As for my uncle, to whom I wrote two weeks ago, there is his letter, giving a qualified assent. As for my teachers, they would applaud a resolution on the part of any of their graduates to do something for herself and for others. My school friends all have their own plans, and would scarcely be surprised that I have mine. Your approval is all I am waiting for to begin at once my training."

"And that approval you shall never, never have. If Richard Stockton is such a fool as to give his consent after all he has done to make you a lady, if he would consent to your lowering the family, then I am done with him also. If, as you say, your decision is fully made, I wash my hands of you forever, and the sooner you go the

better. I utterly disown you from that time." And Mrs. Haughton leaned back in her chair, with jaws firmly set, and the angry flush still on her cheek.

It was in vain that Stella reasoned; she would listen to no argument, yield to no softness; but rising at last in harsh displeasure, she said:

"I see that you are still very far from sane, or you would never have broken off with Weston, as he foolishly prefers to be called, or have formed such a project as this. If you will not listen to reason, then go your own way; and,

as I have said, the sooner the better."

Stella could and would make no concession to her aunt's prejudices; for she had arrived at her determination only after much meditation and weighing of influences. Her chief argument was that her own life being hopelessly ruined, she could never expect happiness in this world; therefore she would make the most of life's tarnished remnant by accomplishing the most good for others of which she might be capable. As in her former free and unrestricted life nursing would have appeared the least congenial, so now it appealed to her most strongly as the one avenue for her human sympathies and her powers of endurance. Mary Godwin's example had appealed to her irresistibly.

At the close of her argument Mrs. Haughton turned, and without vouchsafing a reply went in. It was the only time she had made any allusion to the breaking of the engagement, and she would not have alluded to it now but that she saw Stella was determined, and there would be no renewal, in all probability, if the girl insisted on making a professional nurse of herself. The truth of the matter was that, in so far as Stella had herself broken the engagement, her aunt was very willing for it to remain broken, she having several little "projects" in her own mind with respect to Weston and Ethel; for since the identity and large wealth of Weston had been made known that gentleman had very considerably risen in her estimation.

The "qualified consent" of which Stella had spoken was that she should never go out to nurse other than female patients or children; so now, having completed the arrangement with Mary Godwin, the next few days saw her installed in the training-school, in whose corps

Mary held a responsible position.

Autumn passed, winter came and went, spring merged slowly into summer; and within that period Stella had seen much of suffering, had gained much valuable knowledge, and had received the warm commendations of head nurses and physicians for her nerve and skill. She had resolutely put away all thought of self, and each month found her gaining more control over herself and over her charges.

Day after day, as she saw eyes heavy and dull with suffering follow her movements, and wan faces brighten at her approach, she rejoiced that she had found courage to brave her aunt's displeasure and to devote her strength and en-

ergies to such a good cause.

A solid friendship had long been cemented between herself and Mary; for though there was great disparity in their knowledge and experience of the world, there was no great difference in years, Mary being only a few years her senior.

Summer came on and the hospital work was unusually heavy. Some of the nurses were taking vacation, but Mary and Stella remained at their posts; for since she had gone counter to her aunt's wishes she felt that Oaklands was virtually closed to her. Besides, she wished to take her vacation when Mary took hers.

Severe physical strain and nocturnal vigils were beginning to tell seriously upon her, causing Mary to fear lest she break down. One hot day she was found in a swoon from exhaustion, and the chief physician had commanded rest.

While Mary was casting about for a suitable place for Stella a letter came from Nellie, written in her usual affectionate and entertaining style, and giving an enchanting itinerary of a projected Canadian tour. She closed with a threat of her severe and lasting displeasure unless Stella should immediately accept an invitation to accompany Will and herself on this trip, charging her to beware of the offense of even bringing a pocketbook along with her.

Stella's heart was filled with gratitude, and she experienced a feeling nearer akin to pleasure than she had entertained for a year. She took the letter to Mary, who was as much

pleased as Stella herself.

"I was becoming seriously alarmed about you, dear, and was perplexed to find a suitable place for you near at hand. This settles the question so satisfactorily."

Accordingly, she made ready to join Nellie at the appointed rendezvous, and the cordial greet-

ing of the latter was:

"My dearest girl, you don't know what a pleasure you have given by joining us. I was so much afraid you would allow some cranky little notion to keep you from coming. You are looking pale and tired, my dear, but the fresh breezes of the Lakes and the Canadian plains will soon recall the roses to your cheeks."

Will's greeting was no less cordial than his

wife's.

"You have done my wife a far greater favor than you imagine," said he. "It has been two months since Ethel left us, so she is growing tired of my company and longs for some sympathizing friend into whose ear to pour the tale of matrimonial infelicities. Eh? is it not so, my spouse?" and, à la Napoleon, he pinched his wife's pretty pink ear.

"Take care, sir; I have a deal to tell already. You see for yourself, Stella, how he pinches me. When I sue for a divorce you can testify that you saw him do it," and she turned her eyes, bright with joy and laughter, toward Stella, and then looked lovingly at her husband. Stella's

heart bounded with joy to see them both so

happy.

As the latter, several hours later, was standing in some perplexity beside her trunk, considering how with her meager wardrobe she was to apparel herself in such wise as to reflect no discredit upon her hosts, Nellie came in smiling genially.

"What troubles you?" she asked, seeing

Stella's troubled look.

After Stella had told her, she said:

"Come into my room. I have something to show you." And there upon the bed were several beautiful evening dresses, with all the accessories.

"I took the liberty of having these made for you before I left St. Louis, as I remembered your measurements, and I knew you would have no time to attend to such matters. Except for the hotels, one does not need much besides a traveling-dress on a tour such as ours, and I think you will find these sufficient, dear."

She paused a moment, for Stella was struggling for words with which to express her gratitude, being overcome at Nellie's generous and

unexpected kindness.

"Ah! I see," cried the latter laughing, and kissing her, "you wish to refuse them; but I shall not allow it. No, no thanks; for it really puts me to my wits' end to get rid of each instalment of my pin-money before another is forced upon me," and she whispered into her young cousin's ear, as a weighty and dishonorable se-

cret, "Dear Will is so wealthy that I am positively ashamed of him. Why, just think of it!" she resumed in her natural tones, "I have already been able from this same pin-money to lift all dear mama's mortgages, and to relieve other financial embarrassments," and in her attempts to keep back Stella's grateful tears her own kind eyes overran with the pure joy of beneficence.

Later, as Stella stood arrayed in one of the

pretty gowns, Nellie remarked:

"How very becoming to you is this delicate shade of pink; but every color is becoming to your style of beauty. See, the roses are coming back now, and we will try to keep them there." And when Will joined them and looked his admiration, his wife said, laughing:

"Take care, sir; I will not have you casting such admiring glances on any woman but my-

self. You had best not make me jealous."

As they were leaving the table after tea a gentleman of striking appearance came over from another table and touched Will on the shoulder. The latter, turning, exclaimed, as he cordially grasped the other's hand:

"Why, Everard, you here? I thought you were in the heart of India," and he presented

him to his wife and Stella.

"Ah! I understand now why no inducement could move you to accompany me. You are on a wedding-trip, I presume."

When informed that the wedding-trip had

been taken almost a year previously, he said,

pleasantly:

"That being the case, Mrs. Willoughby, I trust you will not consider me de trop if I crave the privilege of joining your party for a portion of the evening. Your husband, Weston, and myself have been much together in our lives."

They found him a delightful acquisition. He was a man of charming manners, and to a natural sprightliness he added all that is to be gained from extensive travels over three continents, had seen much of cosmopolitan society, and was so full of pleasant reminiscences and anecdote that both Nellie and Stella were greatly entertained by his brilliant descriptions, interesting narrative, and good-humored witticisms. When he learned of their projected route, he said:

"I once went over that same ground myself. I wish I might be allowed to join you at Que-

bec."

"Then do so, my dear fellow, by all means. We shall be charmed to have you," said Will.

"With permission of the ladies," he answered, looking at them deferentially, and waiting for them to second Will's invitation. Nellie did second it cordially, but Stella only bowed silently, endeavoring for the sake of her entertainers not to show the sudden dissatisfaction she experienced.

Mr. Everard was assuredly most cultured, most agreeable as a chance acquaintance, seen one day and gone the next; but to have him as

one of the party for a portion of their travels would, she felt, deprive her of the chief pleasure of the trip—the free and unconstrained enjoyment of new scenes, with only Will and Nellie. The sad blight which had fallen upon her life made her especially reluctant to form new acquaintances; for the haunting thought was ever present, "What if one could know?" and she always shrank from any allusion to her past or future with a thrill of intense pain and disquietude.

When Mr. Everard parted from them that evening he said: "I consider myself very happy in saying au revoir instead of good-by."

"Stella," said Will when his friend was out of hearing, "there is a good chance for any girl. I know of no more elegant, charming, and honorable gentleman than Hunter Everard. I was much with him at college, much during my travels in Europe, and have never known him to be guilty of any act unbecoming a preux chevalier."

Nellie silently gave his arm a sly pinch.

"What was it, little woman? why did you give me that admonitory check just now?" he asked when they had seen Stella to her room.

"Do you want her to forget Weston? Here I have been endeavoring to revive his image, and

now you are undoing my work."

"Very far am I from wishing her to forget Weston, dear unhappy fellow; but you have adopted the wrong tactics. With you womenfolk one must work by the rule of contraries. Let her think there is no connivance on our part to bring them together, but that we are trying to make a match between her and Everard; let us praise the latter unstintingly, and forthwith she will veer around and discover that Weston is a paragon and will begin to wish him again at her feet."

Nellie raised her eyebrows and shrugged her shoulders at his theory, whereupon he con-

tinued:

"You know, my dear, you would never have accepted me if you had not first had your tender sympathies aroused for the unfortunate cripple. Like Desdemona, you loved me for my misfortune; or, did you all the while suspect me of being the impostor I afterward proved to be?" he asked teasingly.

"How could you ever stretch your imagination so far as to think I could love you for anything else than your misfortune?" she replied, leaning against his shoulder and looking up

into his face with loving eyes.

CHAPTER XXXII

A few afternoons later saw our tourist party steaming along the pellucid waters of Lake Superior, Nellie and Stella going into ecstasies over each new scene as the steamer glided over the waters, now nearing the land where the shore was precipitous, or putting out at a greater distance as some projecting rock or headland jutted out into the bosom of the lake.

Will, knowing all the dangers of navigating this great inland sea—its fogs, its sudden and violent storms, its long reaches of towering rock walls, its blinding flurries of feathery snow, even before the end of summer—had left the choice to his wife and her cousin whether they would take the steamer or the Canadian Transcontinental; the latter the safer, the former the more interesting route.

They unhesitatingly chose the former, after Will, consulting some lake-faring men, had their assurance that at this particular season the dangers of the treacherous lake were at their

minimum.

He himself had made the trip once before; but smiled sympathetically at their rhapsodies as they admired the broad expanse of waters; the ever-varying colors—from emerald green to darkest blue—here reflecting with mirror-like distinctness the vivid brightness of the azure sky, and the white phantom of some passing

cloud; there, the rock-bound shore with its startling changes of color, the trap-rock cliffs, the dark impending forests upon their summits, and the defiant headlands, against which, as at Thunder Cape, the boiling waves dash themselves in sudden tempests with Titanic fury.

But it was while the crimson globe of the setting sun seemed to pause in order to contemplate his reflected image before sinking into his watery bed and bidding half the world goodnight, that the gorgeous beauty of Lake Superior reached its climax; when earth, air, sky and water combining their chromatic wonders, filled the heart with rapture and thankfulness for the glorious beauty of Nature and left the

imagination nothing to wish for.

When, finally, they left the steamer and took the train, the imaginative and intense nature of Stella was deeply stirred by the scenes through which they were passing. As the cars whirled along the level plains she looked out, musing upon the time when only savage beasts and still more savage men prowled over these frozen and inhospitable wastes; until the heroic Jesuit missionaries began to push their discoveries toward the far west, winning the confidence and respect of the wild tribes by uncomplainingly sharing their dangers and privations; by faithfully fulfilling with them their contracts, and by glorifying the religion of Jesus in their self-sacrificing and holy lives.

It was upon the Plains of Abraham, while contemplating the dual monument to the heroic

Wolfe and the gallant Montcalm, that Hunter

Everard joined them.

Stella's heart sank as she saw him; but the expression of pleasure upon his face was unmistakable. From that time on he devoted himself with unconcealed admiration to her. When they

were leaving Quebec he said to her:

"How much I wish I could retain you here till the first deep snow. It is scarcely Quebec until one awakes on a cold January morning and finds the city snowed under a modern Herculaneum. You have no idea how exhilarating it is, after being dug out, to hear ten thousand sleighbells, all tinkling together and mingling with the merry laughter of the society belles as, muffled in warm furs, they and their escorts dash by in their rapid sleighs."

"You put it in a very attractive light; I have no doubt that it is charming," she answered, smiling. "I think it would be interesting to watch the toboggans flashing down the chutes, though I imagine it would be something of a mixed pleasure to a novice. The sensation of the rapid descent must be distinctly uncomfort-

able."

"I believe the novices do sometimes pierce the frosty air with their shrieks."

"And frantically but confidingly clasp their

escorts," interrupted Will, causing a laugh.

At Montreal, Ottawa, and the Thousand Islands, Mr. Everard still kept with them; and the truth was evident to all that he was deeply interested in Stella.

This discovery caused her exquisite pain and regret. She took an early occasion to acquaint him with the fact that she had given up everything that generally makes life attractive, to devote herself to the care and alleviation of human suffering, hoping to show him that as a professional nurse social convention had placed an insuperable barrier between her and such a favored darling of fortune as himself.

But Hunter Everard was a true and noble man. Though he was at first shocked at what he deemed an unnecessary sacrifice of herself, he sought only the more earnestly to win her

from such an immolation.

But Stella had recognized the stubborn fact that, struggle against it as she might, her heart was unalterably fixed upon one whom her sensitive and honorable soul had forced her to renounce in a manner as merciless to herself as to him.

She had a very high regard for her present suitor, however, and it was not in her nature to repulse coldly and cruelly the homage of an honorable love. She therefore determined to prevent, if not too late, the waste of such loyal affection upon herself. Moreover, the horrible burden of dishonor which was all the while crushing her spirit, in her opinion was enough to segregate her from her fellows as if the taint of leprosy were upon her; and frequently, in the dead hours of the night, awake or in unquiet slumber, the dread specter of disgrace hovered over her.

Nellie detected symptoms of a return to a condition similar to her former collapse, and entering her room one day came frankly to the point. Putting her arms affectionately around her young cousin she begged to be told the cause of her nervous perturbation. Then the unhappy victim, feeling it useless to deny, confessed that she was again threatened with her former trouble and that she wished to return immediately to Mary Godwin.

As soon as a reluctant consent had been obtained for her release, and she was preparing to leave them, Stella grew calmer; and in the expectation of being relieved of Mr. Everard's persistent suit she evinced a greater degree of cordiality, acquainting him at the same time of

her near departure.

Then it was, upon the moonlit bosom of beautiful Lake George, that he made to her an impassioned declaration of his love, only to obtain from her an avowal of friendship, much in itself, but oh! how inadequate to satisfy one who has lavished a whole wealth of affection and homage upon an unresponsive object.

When in some degree he had succeeded in suppressing his acute disappointment he said:

"Ah! I see now how it is. You have already given your heart to another." And she, in order that he might cherish no further hope, made no denial.

He left them the next day. At parting he said to Will:

"My dear fellow, why did you not give me

some intimation of Miss Hope's prior attachment? It would have saved me infinite pain."

Then Will, believing that Stella had relented toward Weston, immediately wrote the latter to meet her in New York and renew his suit. The result was, that shortly after the return to her hospital duties she was summoned to see a caller, and to her great surprise and sorrow that caller was no other than Weston.

He was standing at the window, looking thoughtfully out; but at the sound of that well-remembered footstep, with quick impulsiveness he turned, his soul in his eyes, and held out both hands.

"Stella, dearest, is it true?" he asked, joyous

expectation illuminating his features.

"Is what true?" she inquired, pausing and laying one trembling, cold hand in his own, for a sudden fear seized her.

"Do you not know what? Did you not au-

thorize Will to write me?"

"No," she answered, turning very pale; "I have never remotely hinted at his writing you anything in connection with myself. What did

he—did he write you?"

"Oh, it does not matter in the least if you did not authorize him," he answered bitterly. "Fool that I was to listen to the promptings of my own heart, and to come to you without your direct summons. And is this the welcome you give me after a separation of a whole year? Stella, can it be?" and he looked at her with sorrowful, reproachful eyes. She hesitated painfully, and then said

faintly:

"As a friend—a dear, tried and faithful friend—I shall always be glad to welcome you. As a friend the remembrance of all you have been to me will ever be one of my dearest possessions; but—but—if you come with any other expectation, I am very sorry that you—that you came at all."

Weston stood silent, too disappointed for an immediate reply. He gazed sorrowfully upon her pale features, while his own were undergoing alternations of varying expressions. Her eyes were cast down to conceal the sharp anguish of her soul, for the voice of love would fain have cried out to him and bidden him joyful welcome; but ah! that fatal barrier of shame, sundering her from all happiness, all hope! Oh! just to feel once more the firm support of those strong, sheltering arms; to lean her weary head against that protecting bosom!

While Weston stood with her hand in his, looking down into her face, he was tempted to take her suddenly in his arms and tell her that he knew all, had known it all the while, and compel her by the power of his own unalterable devotion to submit to his will; to lay the burden of her wrongs and sufferings upon him, and then to go and bring the destroyer of her peace

to public justice.

He saw that the blight of this secret wrong was ruining her young life; and with no one authorized to make her cause his own, to fight this battle for her, she was in danger of despair and madness. He was thinking these things when, with an effort to withdraw her hand, she

glanced into his face.

"Darling," he cried suddenly, "you do care for me. I read it in every lineament of your dear face; but there is something that is dividing us which you will not tell me. Oh! Stella, Stella, be kind to me; be just to me and to yourself. Tell me what is this mysterious barrier which is separating us. Give me the privilege and I will devote the untiring energies of my life to you."

He suddenly ceased, for a wild terror was dilating her eyes, and a paleness as of death was settling upon her face. She would have fallen but that he caught her in his arms and placed her upon a sofa, fanning her vigorously till she opened her eyes. In a few minutes she had

revived sufficiently to half rise, saying:

"I am not well, and must leave you now."

"And may I not see you again when you are

feeling stronger?" appealingly.

"No; it is best that you should not. I cannot endure it. Besides, nothing can alter my determination—at least, not yet; but if anything shall ever occur to cause me to change, I solemnly promise to summon you, unless you yourself change and no longer desire it."

All this she spoke hesitatingly, being still faint; but she was standing erect now, and he

also.

"Will you give me your hand, look me in the

face squarely, and swear it?" he asked with

more of hope than he had before shown.

"Yes, I swear it! let that content you," she answered, laying her hand again in his. His other closed over it.

"Must I go now?"

"Yes; it is best. Go now and do not try to

see me again till I summon you."

"Farewell then, O best-beloved. May that time come soon!" he whispered in a voice husky with emotion; and stooping quickly, he imprinted a fervent kiss upon her trembling lips, and the next moment he was gone; and the fair hope that Will's letter had caused to blossom in his heart was gone also.

CHAPTER XXXIII

When Falmouth, the detective, started out to find the whereabouts of Morna Lea he encountered some difficulty; for though the kind Mother Superior had procured a situation for her as governess to the children of a former graduate of that institution, Morna had failed to keep it more than a few months.

The duties of the position had been comparatively light, and the compensation amply sufficient for a young woman with no relative

dependent on her and no debts.

At first she had seemed pleased and grateful at the prospect of earning her own livelihood, and went at once to her post of duty. Affairs went passably well for a few months, and then came a day when the young governess was

moody and out of sorts.

The routine was irksome to her; she longed for more movement, more excitement. The children were affected by her own lack of interest in the lessons, and a general contagion of discontent followed. The inexperienced governess became unduly irritated, scolded at imperfect recitations, and finally boxed the ears of one of the delinquents and he went screaming to his mother. The latter came to the school-room to inquire into the nature of her son's offense, the impatient girl resented it, and be-

came insolent. Words, calm on one side, violent on the other, followed, and the governess was discharged, with a *douceur* of a month's unearned wages. Thus the connection was sev-

ered with no regret on either side.

It was more difficult to find another situation, since her late patroness could give her no recommendation, and she was ashamed to apply again to the Mother Superior. Her small amount of funds became quite exhausted by the time she secured another charge, and she now resolved to exercise more discipline over herself; but unfortunately, she had not as gentle a patroness as her former one, and the children were spoilt and unruly. Again the result was dismissal after a trial of several months.

This time she found herself, as it were, almost cast into the street, and was glad to accept anything that would afford a decent support. She bought a newspaper, and in the column of "Wants" found an advertisement for a typewriter. As she had come to the conclusion some time before that teaching was not her proper vocation, she applied for the advertised position and obtained it.

Her employer was a rather prosperous and well-favored grocer, and she made no inquiries as to his moral character, which, if she had taken the precaution to inquire into, she would have found to be not particularly savory.

It was at this time that Falmouth made her acquaintance, introducing himself as an agent for a newly patented billing-machine. He did

not succeed in selling one to Hoskins, the young grocer, but made himself so agreeable to the typewriter as to be recognized by her with a smile the next morning when he placed himself in her way as she was going to her place of business. He made occasion to call again at the grocer's on some pretext or other, and always contrived to speak with Morna Lea. Finally, he asked and obtained permission to visit her at her boarding-house. He affected the cynical, devil-may-care sort of fellow, making his conversation as spicy and entertaining as possible; and very soon was on quite intimate terms with her.

As time went on it did not require all his professional discernment to discover that the girl was using every effort to ensnare into marriage

the well-to-do young business man.

She liked Falmouth for his superior mentality and entertaining powers, but having tasted poverty, she had an eye to the main chance; for Falmouth, in order to protect himself from a too serious regard on her part, had confided to her that his own means were very narrow.

Now the grocer had ambitious views in regard to a rich butcher's daughter, but was very willing to meet his typewriter's overtures more than half way.

The young woman was unmistakably handsome, after a beauté-de-diable style, and was

both vivacious and capable.

Falmouth now took occasion to inquire into

the antecedents of Hoskins and learned that

his reputation was not of the best.

Although Weston's interests were always to be paramount, Falmouth could not see an unprotected girl go straight to ruin, and he ventured to warn her against her employer; but she cut him short, and with decided emphasis admonished him to attend to his own business.

It served Falmouth's purposes best to take no offense. He had performed his duty in warning her; if she would go her own way, why go it she

must. That was all.

Thus the affair progressed; Morna determined to win the grocer for a husband, and he was equally as determined to win the butcher's daughter, but to accept this girl's affections, if she would insist on lavishing them upon himself; while Falmouth was more determined than either to reap some advantage for himself and Weston out of the situation. But to do him justice, he made another effort to open the girl's eyes to the true character of Hoskins.

Again he was rebuffed, more violently than

before.

"I have asked you to attend to your own affairs and let mine alone," she said with vehemence. "I shall pursue my own course,

though the Devil stand in the way!"

To Falmouth this appeared sufficient. He stepped back and made her a profound bow. From that time he affected a greater cynicism, and even jealousy; which last flattered her vanity, and she continued to allow his visits.

All along during the acquaintance, Falmouth had endeavored to find some pretext for drawing the girl out in such wise as to make her give a clue as to her feelings toward Stella Hope, and thus by induction to discover for himself whether she was capable of the terrible revenge he had no doubt she had perpetrated. But although she never suspected his true vocation she was extremely cautious and noncommittal as to her acquaintance and antecedents.

Finding himself foiled, he now on one occasion turned the conversation deliberately on

the subject of revenge.

"If you marry Hoskins I think I will be tempted to kill him," he remarked, regarding her intently, yet as with the jealous eye of a slighted lover.

She was pleased at the implied tribute to her

charms.

"Why should you wish to kill him?" she asked, smiling in evident triumph.

"For revenge!" he answered with assumed

ferocity.

She laughed aloud.

"Ha, ha! that would not benefit you at all,"

she replied.

"Yes; for revenge is sweet. Hate is the one undying passion of strong men's hearts," said he.

"And of some women's, too," she laughed

harshly and vindictively.

"Ah! women's hearts are too soft to retain

resentments. You could never persuade me

that your heart is not as wax," he replied.

"Not it," she cried fiercely. "I could act Lady Macbeth to the very life if it served my purpose!"

He answered with a laugh of incredulity and derision. This vexed her and she continued

with increasing vehemence.

"You do not believe me. But I declare I would do anything to wreak vengeance on one who had wronged me."

He still smiled incredulously as he answered:

"You may think so now, but if it came to the test you would melt into tears and repent of having even harbored revengeful thoughts. I know women too well."

"You don't know me," she flashed forth. "I would never repent—not even on my dying

bed."

"That you say because you have never had any experience of being wronged or of taking revenge. Under actual proof you would be like all women—too cowardly to execute what you had dared to plan." This enraged her and she threw prudence to the winds.

"I have done it already!" she exclaimed

with flashing eyes.

"Oh—h! did you whip a kitten for scratching you?" he asked with the same provoking smile.

"Kitten, indeed! No, I crushed the reptile that dared to rear its head before me. I scotched her in such a fashion that she will never dare to crawl across my pathway again!"

and her eyes snapped with pure hate.

"Give me your hand," cried Falmouth with all the appearance of enthusiasm. "You are a girl after my own heart. Did she cheat you out of a lover?"

"Lover?—no. But by insinuating herself like the old serpent into the good graces of those fool Sisters at the convent, she cheated me out of well-earned honors. Oh! but she will never enjoy them."

Beyond this he could get nothing further from her, but he considered it much; and wrote to Weston of his success so far, and of the certainty of Miss Hope's innocence; but as to her public vindication, it might be very far off yet.

This was about the time of Stella's return from her Canadian tour, and Falmouth labored hard to bring Morna back to the subject of her attitude toward Miss Hope, but could get nothing more that was incriminating from her. She seemed to have repented of her one confidence and he could never bring her back to that subject; but he waited and watched.

It was growing well on into the winter when he began to observe signs of a marked discontent about her. He was at a loss to understand the cause until he watched the movements of Hoskins and discovered that he was paying devoted court to the butcher's daughter.

Whether Hoskins had ever broached the subject of matrimony to his typewriter, Falmouth had no means of finding out; but that she had in

some way gotten wind of his attentions to the young woman in question and was extremely

jealous, he had no doubt.

It was not long after this that affairs reached a crisis. From a dressmaker Morna learned that Miss Weller, the butcher's daughter, was having her wedding clothes made, and the jealous girl leaped to a very reasonable conclusion. It then appeared that Hoskins had really offered Morna some sort of a promise of marriage, and she boldly charged him with perfidy and threatened to prosecute him for breach of faith. Taking alarm lest the prize might slip from his grasp, the man, under pretext of immediate and urgent business abroad, urged a speedy marriage. The ceremony was scarcely completed and the happy pair well on their way to New York when the slighted employé of the groom learned of the consummation of the engagement.

Frantic with disappointed hope and rage, she resolved to follow and wreak vengeance on the groom. Falmouth, under a disguise, followed and watched her every movement. He saw her purchase a revolver and he entertained no doubt that her intentions were deadly. For several hours, while waiting for the next train, the girl chafed like a caged tigress, and the

more determined grew her expression.

When she finally, after some unexpected delays, reached New York and discovered that the steamer only an hour previously had sailed, and she was cheated of her vengeance, as she had been cheated of her lover, she became desperate. With set face, and lips blue from compression, Falmouth beheld her turn away and seek the nearest drug store. He followed, and heard her ask and be refused a deadly poison unless she could furnish a physician's prescription.

Laboring under the intensest excitement, she now entered a grocery, but he was too late to hear her demand. Then as she came out with a tin box unwrapped in her hand, it had the appearance of a box of sardines, and his fears of suicide were allayed.

"Ah," thought he, "if she can eat, all is

well."

From this point she proceeded in search of a cheap hotel, and he heard her ask to be accommodated with a room. When she obtained it, Falmouth preferred the same request, asking that he be given one as near the late applicant as possible, and was fortunate in securing an apartment adjoining Morna's. Then he sat himself down to consider his future action.

He had been weighing first one course and then another for perhaps twenty minutes, when he was startled to hear agonizing groans proceeding from the girl's room. Hastening for some one in authority the door was forced, and the wretched young woman was found on the floor in mortal agony. The box she had purchased contained potash.

While a physician was being summoned, and everything done for the would-be suicide's re-

lief, Falmouth dispatched a special messenger for Weston, who in this extremity was to decide what was most expedient to be done.

CHAPTER XXXIV

When, after Stella's return from Canada, she had recovered from the disquieting effects of Weston's presence and words, she fell back thankfully into the old routine of duty, recognizing that tranquillity, if not happiness, was the reward of her consecrated labors. Thus again passed the dreary autumn, and now winter, to her still more dreary, was nearing its last month.

Weston had remained in New York that he might be near her, and frequently, through the connivance of Mary Godwin, whom he had taken into his confidence, he saw Stella without being himself recognized. But just at that time came intelligence from Falmouth; and while there had been no assurance of final success, the tone was hopeful, and Weston felt disposed to remain in New York rather than spend the winter elsewhere.

One late afternoon, when the air was filled with invisible but penetrating needles of ice, he had just stepped out of his hotel for a walk, and was buttoning his overcoat, when he was run against by a messenger-boy, half blinded by the sudden turning on of the electric lights.

"Halloa! my young friend, take care that you don't brain yourself," was Weston's cheery warning to the shivering, half-frozen youth. "Beg pardon, but I was afraid of missing you. They pointed you out to me as you were leaving your hotel, and I was looking for you with an important message," the boy replied apologetically.

Weston received it, and read by the street light the message from Falmouth summoning him with all haste to a fifth-rate hotel near the

wharf.

Full of joyful hope he hailed a passing cab, and hurriedly drawing from his pocket a bankbill, he thrust it into the messenger-boy's hand.

"There, take that, and buy yourself something warm," he said, leaving the youth gaping with delighted astonishment at the generous tip.

"Well!" Weston exclaimed half an hour later, as he grasped the extended hand of Fal-

mouth, who was on the lookout for him.

"Come with me," was the only reply, as he was hurried along several hallways and staircases. At last he pushed open a door, motioned Weston to enter, and then cautiously closing the door, said, "She is here."

Weston turned excitedly toward him. "Here? What does that signify?"

"Everything, or nothing, as the case may be managed," replied Falmouth calmly.

"Let me hear all. Hurry up!" cried Wes-

ton.

Then the detective related as succinctly as possible all that had transpired since his last communication to him; and at the conclusion

his auditor asked breathlessly, "And what do

you now propose?"

"To take the girl at once to the hospital where Miss Hope is on duty. To place her under the ministrations of the latter, and perhaps through gratitude for gentle nursing she may be brought to confess all; especially if she dies," he replied.

Weston grasped his hand.

"Whatever may be the result," said he warmly, "you have earned your reward, and my everlasting gratitude. God grant the wretched girl's life be prolonged sufficiently to make a confession, if she must die."

Weston did not delay a moment. Hastening to Mary Godwin, arrangements were speedily made to have Morna Lea placed under the care of Stella without acquainting the latter with

the name of her prospective charge.

Within a room somewhat apart, then, Morna Lea was placed by order of Mary Godwin, who was now chief in authority over a certain ward. The patient had been wildly delirious, but the transportation accomplished, she was now lying unconscious under the influence of a powerful anodyne.

Stella did not go on duty till the second vigil. It was midnight when she entered the room and

received the instructions for treatment.

The light was low; and for more than an hour the sufferer did not wake, though she frequently moaned in her sleep; and Stella, sitting beside her, was dropping into a light doze

when her charge suddenly started up, crying with a shriek,

"Water, water! for God's sake, water!" and

fell back.

The nurse sprang up, turned the light higher, and bringing the water, mixed with a palliative, was slipping an arm under the sufferer's head to raise her, when the latter, seizing the glass, with the greatest avidity drained it to the last drop, crying out,

"More, more!"

But the nurse stood transfixed with shuddering repulsion as the patient raised her face.

The recognition was simultaneous; for Morna Lea was conscious now, and making a frantic but futile effort to spring from her

couch, she cried,

"Stella Hope! you here! Have I passed to the abode of the lost and are you here to accuse me before the Judge? Go away with your reproachful eyes! Do I not already suffer enough to satisfy a demon's hate? I will not look upon you!" and she pressed her twitching hands before her eyes and sank back, cowering.

The shock of recognition had for a few seconds almost paralyzed Stella; but at the quasiconfession of her arch-enemy a joyful hope sprang up in her bosom, and she fell upon her

knees beside Morna.

"Oh! Morna, Morna! I entreat you as you hope for mercy in the final judgment, be merciful to me. Confess before witnesses, or only

one witness, the wrong you have done me, and I will forgive, and bless you to my dying day."

In her excitement, forgetting the relations of patient and nurse, forgetting the weakened condition of the former, forgetting everything but her own grievous wrong, she seized the girl's hand entreatingly. But Morna threw back the hand with all the violence of which she was capable, and screamed,

"Go away! Go away! I hate you more than

ever!"

"Only confess, Morna, and I will love you."
"It is a lie; it would be impossible for you

to love me. I know you will murder me."

"Morna, if you will only confess to the man who loves me, it is all I ask. Will you, Morna?"

"Never! never! NEVER!" shrieked the girl with increasing vehemence. "Revenge is too sweet! I will never repent, nor confess!" and she laughed in demoniac joy, even as she writhed in pain.

Stella arose from her knees, saying in a

broken voice.

"Then may God help me to forgive you, and

to remember only my duties as nurse."

It was now that the splendid training of the nurse rose superior to wronged human nature; for Stella, resolutely putting aside all personal feeling, turned, and with steady hand brought a sedative. After a quick, searching glance, as if she feared poison, Morna drank it and fell at once into a deep slumber, while the nurse, keeping faithful vigil, sat and sadly pondered upon the wreck of her own happiness wrought by this

girl.

To forgive her from the heart, to continue to nurse her, required almost superhuman strength; but when, toward morning, she raised her head, and gazed long and earnestly upon the features of the still more wrecked woman before her, she had gained the victory over self, and there was joy among the angels of heaven.

CHAPTER XXXV

Time, the never-pausing, irrevocable, yet passes with slower pace in the chambers of the sick than elsewhere; but weeks had crept by since the introduction of Morna Lea to the hospital in which Stella Hope ministered to the suffering, and she was well enough to be discharged. She was going again into the great world and to become an adventuress of the most reckless stamp.

Since that first night of mutual recognition she had never voluntarily addressed a word to her faithful and forbearing nurse, but accepted her services in sullen and determined silence. On one occasion she regarded her malevolently

and said,

"You think to win me over and wring from me a voluntary confession. Let me tell you now, once for all, that you might as well expect to melt a block of granite as melt my heart to pity; for I swear, never through any consideration of entreaty, prayers, threats or money, to confess or repair any injury I have done you. To you, with none to hear me but yourself, I glory in declaring that I deliberately ruined you because you dared stand in my way. Now if you will persist in your unwelcome and hypocritical attentions, you will gain nothing but contempt added to hate."

Since that assurance the time had dragged with leaden pace; but with the duties of her training ever uppermost in her consciousness, Stella had never relaxed her ministrations, but sat night after night through her lonely vigils. Never a word of expressed impatience had escaped her lips, though several times she had been compelled to summon higher authority to enforce submission on the part of the patient. Fortunately, to modify the strain of this unhappy period there came a letter from Nellie giving the recipient other things than her own trials to think of.

Among other items, she learned that the family at Oaklands had been well and happy with the exception of Marie, who, having been so long practically deserted by her husband, was now suing for a divorce. Ethel had passed the greater part of the winter with Nellie herself in St. Louis, where she had been wonderfully popular and admired; and she went on to tell of the great change in Ethel for the better, and how greater development of character could be hoped for if she might marry a man of noble character, such, for instance, as Mr. Everard, who now was in St. Louis. Ethel was now in New Orleans, however, whither she had gone to visit Rita during Mardi Gras. Rita's engagement had been annulled, for some cause which she would not explain, but it was thought it was not broken hopelessly.

Under the unremitting strain which Stella had so long been suffering she might have col-

lapsed but for the diversion caused by this letter, for the weather had been unseasonably warm and the number of nurses had been greatly reduced on account of a severe epidemic of la grippe and pneumonia in the city, while the proportion of patients had been unusually large for the corps left. Yet she bore up bravely till Morna's discharge was given her, and then her heart sank. But Mary Godwin buoyed up her sinking spirits by telling her that in spite of the girl's obdurateness, it was impossible she could leave the hospital where she had been saved as by a miracle and so kindly treated, without repairing the wrong she had done an innocent girl.

It was an hour of terrible suspense when she saw Morna silently making her few preparations for departure; recognizing, as she did, that once gone, her own hopes were blasted.

Mary was almost as much wrought up as Stella, and Weston, who had been the motive power in the whole business, was watching with a consuming anxiety, and restlessness that was maddening, the play of the last card.

But if Morna had felt any stirring of gratitude, or awakening of conscience, she had given no sign; so now, ready to depart, she stood

drawing on her gloves.

The nervous tension upon Stella was too great to be borne with outward composure, and she now turned her face to the window to conceal her agitation.

Morna put on one glove and looked toward

her late nurse. Then she drew on the other with exasperating slowness and glanced at Mary Godwin. Finally, she took up her hand-satchel and half turned toward the door.

There was a sudden fearful tightening around the hearts of the two expectant women; and the younger could scarce refrain from crying out under the tense excitement of the fateful moment.

Morna took a step in the direction of the door, paused, moved again, and reached the threshold. There, for the last time pausing, she said.

"Good morning, Miss Godwin," and stepping quickly into the hall, disappeared. A silence fell, and the two women looked despairingly at each other, both feeling that never again would

they behold that evil countenance.

Mary had prepared herself to see Stella, if disappointed, succumb; but she was not prepared for the fearfully long and unyielding swoon that followed. Even the physicians looked grave, and muttered something about "weak heart-action."

When finally she opened her eyes in consciousness, the senior physician, smiling kindly, said,

"Well, nurse, we began to fear you were going to give us the slip. We cannot spare you

very well, but you must take a rest."

Weston was as bitterly disappointed as even Stella herself, for upon her clearance of the charge imputed to her depended all his hopes of happiness, knowing as he did that the highspirited girl would never marry him with this stigma upon her fair fame. But fortunately he was tenacious of purpose, and he had solemnly sworn never to give up till she was righted.

He had straitly charged Falmouth to hover around the hospital, and when Morna Lea left it to follow and locate her, immediately informing him of her whereabouts, so that he might

obtain an interview with her.

Accordingly, only a few hours after her departure, the detective 'phoned him the desired information. To hail a passing cab and hurry to the place was Weston's first care, but again he was to be disappointed; for the girl, endowed with much acuteness, fearing lest she be arrested and prosecuted, employed a ruse to throw any pursuers off the track, and, after taking a room in an obscure boarding-house, went out apparently to look for work. Falmouth, himself deceived, now took the opportunity to dine, but when he returned to keep watch the bird had flown. Additional detectives were now employed to discover her retreat, but several days passed before she was located.

At last perseverance had its reward. Weston dispatched a message to her requesting an interview, and she, believing it to be some one who wished to employ her, readily granted it, and so it came about that she entered his presence with a gracious air.

At sight of her, smiling and handsome, the

strong aversion with which she inspired him rose up most powerfully in his bosom, and he could scarcely refrain from accusing her of all the *diablerie* of which he knew her to be guilty, and turning her over to the tribunal of justice. But instantly recognizing that such a course would be highly impolitic, since he could not adduce positive proofs of her guilt, he smothered his feelings of resentment and disgust.

The opening of the interview was difficult for him, but after a very slight skirmishing he discovered that she was utterly destitute either of shame or remorse,—a moral pachyderm,—and he came at once to the point, asking her the direct question for what sum in ready money she would write and have sealed by a notary a full confession of the wrong she had done Stella

Hope.

Seeing that he knew her guilty, she did not deny it, but laughed in a maliciously defiant manner and challenged him to prove anything. Then driven to desperation at sight of her triumph, he threatened the full course of the law, and declared that Heaven would aid him in

bringing retribution upon her.

"And failing to prove my guilt in open court, you will only succeed in fastening irretrievably upon her the theft," she cried, laughing vindictively; and, himself assured of this, he desisted from threats.

Suddenly she fell back in her chair and laughed with a horrible glee at some thought which appeared to have just struck her. He

regarded her silently with a look in which anger, scorn, and detestation were blended, and recognizing that it was all quite hopeless, he caught up his hat and was striding from the room, when she said unexpectedly,

"Now hear my decision."

"I thought you had decided," he answered

sharply.

"I thought so too, but I have just conceived a brilliant idea. Which, do you think, calls for a sweeter revenge, an earlier or a more recent offense?"

He disdained to answer and she continued,

"I thought, until recently, that nothing within the experience of hatred could ever cause me to forego my revenge upon Stella Hope; but a later and more grievous wrong is burning me up with the intensity of my desire to get even with the perpetrator. If, therefore, you will, on your part, swear a nolle prosequi and hand over to me before the expiration of twenty-four hours, the sum in bank-bills of five thousand dollars, I will do all you ask to clear the reputation of that milk-and-water girl, who. I suppose, has promised you her hand as guerdon of your success in this matter."

"Very well; I agree upon the condition that you write two full confessions giving all the circumstances, one for the Mother Superior of the convent and the other for Miss Hope, to be duly signed, and sealed by the notary, and handed me with one hand, while I place in the other the roll of bills carefully counted out by

the cashier of —— Bank, before your eyes," he replied unhesitatingly, rather surprised that her demands were no greater.

She appeared much pleased with the result

of the interview.

"I will have the papers ready in an hour," said she; then added, "You must love her indeed," an unexpected tone of tenderness softening her voice.

"I do," he answered simply.

"Will you wait for the documents now, or will you return for them later?" she asked.

"I will go now and return at the end of the hour if you really think you can have them ready in that limited space."

"Oh, I will have them ready; never fear," and with that assurance, Weston went out.

When he returned everything was ready, and boarding a car, she sitting at one end and he at

the other, they repaired to the bank.

She stood near enough to see that there was no mistake while the cashier counted out the amount in one-hundred-dollar bills, and then, having drawn a little apart, he handed her the roll of bills while she gave into his eager hand the folded documents. The transaction having thus been quickly completed, they parted at the door of the bank.

Rejoicing in the belief that this would remove every obstacle to a speedy understanding with Stella, Weston went straight to Mary Godwin, and told her of the manner in which he had procured the confession. And she, believing with him that there would now be no barrier to their union, rejoiced with him. But she demurred when he required her to promise that she would never, now or at any other time, disclose to Stella the fact that he had bought the confession, but she was to believe that Morna Lea had given it gratuitously.

Lea had given it gratuitously.

"For," said he, "if she cannot love me for myself, no consideration of gratitude shall ever

influence her."

And so, Mary, perforce, was reticent when she placed the package in Stella's hand, letting her believe that it had been brought by the postman. Then Mary went out and waited for the denouement.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Several weeks have passed and Stella is again at Oaklands; for Mrs. Haughton and the whole family having received a full disclosure of her wrongs, sufferings and justification, she has been most lovingly welcomed into the

bosom of the family.

Hither were forwarded to her letters from the Mother Superior and the good Sisters expressing the warmest sympathy and congratulations, with the promise of writing to all her schoolmates and acquainting them with the facts of the case; from all of whom, in the course of the following month, she heard to the same effect, many of them insisting on her making them a visit, and declaring that they had never violated the promise given to keep the whole matter from the public.

This was exceedingly gratifying; and now, her innocence proven, her spirits rose, and she became gay and animated, enjoying to the full the life which till now she had regarded as

valueless.

Nellie was expected to remain several months and this too added to Stella's happiness. She did not allow herself to speculate about the future, so full of content was she at the unclouded present. Then Nellie and Will embraced her with loving words of joy, and extolled her heroic endurance, telling her they

would endeavor to make up to her her sufferings when she and Ethel went to spend the winter with them in St. Louis.

Never had the name of Weston been mentioned to her, and she had not inquired concerning him. He, alone, if he had known of her fiery trial and its recent removal, had not written. "Is he," she asked herself, "waiting through delicacy for me to acquaint him with the whole sad affair?" She believed so, but could not gain her own consent to appear to bridge the chasm that separated them. So content was she with the present that she resolved to wait passively and allow events to shape their own course.

It was soon after the stork had visited Oaklands, and a tiny form lay beside Nellie, the blissful young mother, that a letter came to Stella from Richard Stockton, to whom she had written explaining everything. He expressed in the strongest terms his indignation at the great wrong put upon her and his warmest admiration at the manner in which she deported herself under such an overwhelming burden of shame. He bade her, if she had any respect for his wishes, or any gratitude for his past benefits, never again to entertain the thought of a return to nursing, and assured her that he had at command ample means both for himself and for her, and that he desired her to take her rightful place in society, and, at least for a season, to enjoy to the full its pleasures and gaieties.

He added, that being himself of an incorrigibly roving disposition, he was making preparations for returning to the Klondike, and had, in consequence of his projected absence, deposited in bank in St. Louis a considerable sum to her credit upon which she must draw unstintingly at her pleasure. A cheque for present needs accompanied the letter, which Stella, laughing tenderly at his quaint old-bachelor style of writing, and exclaiming in gratitude at his great kindness, placed in the hand of the family for perusal.

"Dear," said Nellie, patting her hand, "you shall do just as the old darling says. You shall not know a want, a care, or a sorrow as long as love can ward them off. You must forget the dark experience of the last two years, and give full scope to the natural gaiety of a carefree young girl. For you have not only been defrauded of two years of innocent enjoyment, but have, in addition, had to bear a crushing weight of shame and sorrow that would have

broken a heart less courageous."

And so it came to pass that with the early winter Ethel and Stella, beaming with the promise of a thousand pleasures and the anticipation of the same, hied them to gay and hospitable St. Louis. Ethel, having passed the previous part of the winter there, was everywhere received as an old friend, and it was not long before Stella had gained for herself an equally favorable footing.

Again she met Hunter Everard, and if he ad-

mired her when she was so depressed, doubly did he admire her now when she was all life and esprit, as he clearly perceived, beneath the gay exterior, a woman of profound feeling and

noble aspirations.

His eyes beamed with pleasure on meeting her in the element to which she rightly belonged, and hearing nothing of an engagement,—indeed, being assured that there was none,—he assiduously renewed his suit, undaunted by her former dismissal of him when under the shadow of a great misfortune; for Will had told him all the circumstances connected with that unhappy period. Thus, with the fond hope of winning her for his own, he pressed, gently but persistently his attentions upon her. Never had he met a woman, not even the beauties of foreign courts,—for he had been an attaché at a brilliant court,—who had so impressed him with her possibilities.

And where was Weston all this while, when, apparently nearer the realization of his dreams, he seemed to have relinquished the pursuit and allowed a formidable rival to sue for her fa-

vor?

He had thought it wiser, on her coming into possession of Morna's confession, to absent himself for a while to give her time to recover her mental equilibrium and her former elasticity of spirits, and to dissociate himself entirely from the period of her deepest trouble, lest she come to identify him with it. He foresaw that until she could do this she would be in no con-

dition to accept his addresses, much less to decide on so momentous a question as marriage.

With this course in view he had not come to her in her hour of rejoicing, being content to let her remember that he had sought her in the dark period of her humiliation and distress. And so, leaving her at Oaklands, safe, he had gone West to discover if he might still dare to personate her long-absent uncle.

It was in Seattle, while endeavoring to trace this individual, that he wrote the letter bidding

her cast off all care and look to him.

From city to city of the far West he traveled. always with the same object, the quest of Richard Stockton; and always with the same result, failure. Once or twice, at mining camps, he had come upon remote traces of him, but generally from some old miner or prospector who had known him years before, lost sight of him, and almost forgotten him. At last Weston came to the conclusion, which caused him to breathe more freely, that Stockton had dropped out of existence somewhere, and that no one knew of the resting-place that he had found after so many futile wanderings. He did indeed happen upon one Klondiker of unreliable reputation for veracity who declared that he had known one Dick Stockton in Alaska; that he had died of exposure, and been buried in that inhospitable region.

With this intelligence he felt sufficiently justified in continuing his acts of beneficence toward Stella, hoping and believing that her maternal relative would at any rate not turn up until he himself, as her husband, might be able to acknowledge that he had taken it upon himself to stand in the shoes and discharge the duties of a kinsman.

Then learning through a letter from Will that Stella was in St. Louis and receiving much attention from half a score of admirers, especially Everard, he deemed it time to bring himself again to her notice.

He did not, however, present himself immediately upon his arrival. He chose rather to come upon her suddenly and to observe the ef-

fect.

Accordingly, it was at a box-party, when surrounded by half a dozen young men and women with Everard as her escort, that he entered the theater, and with opera-glass in hand watched her for some little while as she sat, now absorbed in the play, and now exchanging bright sallies with her neighbors.

His heart was throbbing vigorously as he sought the box; but he paused at the entrance and pulled himself together manfully before accosting her. The play was *The Lady of Lyons*,

and Pauline was just saying,

"Tell him For years, I have not nursed a thought That was not his,"

and upon Stella's features the expression of the consummate actress was being reproduced when he put his hand on the back of her chair, and leaning over, said in a low voice,

"Has Miss Hope a word of welcome for an old friend?"

She looked up, startled, and a quick flush of surprise and pleasure deepened on her cheek, as, with eyes that sparkled, she half turned in her seat, and extending her hand impulsively, exclaimed,

"Why, Mr. Weston! I am delighted to see

you. When did you come?"

Mr. Everard rose to his feet.

"Here," he whispered, seizing Weston's hand, and almost drawing him down into the seat he had vacated, "take my place for a little while. Far be it from me to deny a newly arrived friend such a favor," and before Weston could refuse, Everard had moved forward and taken a seat at the farther end of the box, and Weston found himself beside Stella.

Before he again spoke, his quick and appreciative eye took in the elegant details of her exquisite toilette, and his heart throbbed warmly at a thought, unshared by any, that crossed his mind. Noting his glance, rapid as it was, she said softly, with a tinge of momentary embarrassment,

"My costume is somewhat changed since last

you saw me."

"Thank a just Heaven for it!" he murmured with deep feeling.

"And you know the cause?" she asked, hast-

ening to settle the question at once.

"Yes; and may never another shadow of

wrong or sorrow rest over your dear head," he

whispered fervently.

For a few moments both play and players were forgotten. Then, that their conversation, though ever so softly spoken, might not disturb their neighbors, they directed their glances to the stage, though their thoughts were far from being concentrated thereon. During the entr' acte he exchanged greetings with all the party, with whom he was acquainted, leaving no opportunity for further converse with Stella, except to make appointment for a call the following day; and when the curtain rose he relinquished his seat to Everard with an appreciative handshake, and bowed himself out.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"And has the nomad pitched his tent for a season? or will he at the advent of spring again be off 'for fresh woods and pastures new'?" Stella asked laughingly, the next day, in greeting.

"It depends," he answered, looking her in

the face significantly.

It was quite useless to appear unconscious of his meaning; but she endeavored to change

the subject.

"No," said he, "you shall not get away from what I have to say. I have come with the definite purpose of telling you that though so long absent from your side, I have waited merely to give you time for reflection. You must know that there has never been the least shadow of turning from my suit. Nor will I ever give up hope till I see you the bride of another." And upon his face she read the look of unalterable determination.

"So, renouncing the rôle of comet, you are now to become a fixed star," she laughed nervously, still endeavoring to side-track him.

"Yes, relatively, since you are my Polaris. Stella, dear Stella," he broke out impatiently, "why cannot you return my love? It has been so long and so devotedly bestowed upon you."

"I do love you, very truly—as a dear and

valued friend."

His countenance lengthened visibly, and she

exclaimed rallying,

"There now, don't look so 'down in the mouth,' as Aunt Patsy used to say. You don't know how much handsomer you are when you

smile and look happy."

"Then make me happy, and my whole life shall be one long, sweet *smile*," he answered. "Stella, you might as well be serious. No joking will turn me from my purpose. Tell me, are you beginning to care for Everard?"

"I deny your right to question me," with assumed dignity, but he caught a gleam of humor

in her eye and replied,

"I claim the right, as an old friend if not as

a lover, and you must tell me."

"By what compulsion must I? Make me, if you can."

"I will," he cried, and caught her hand. "I will not release it till you tell me the truth."

"Yes, then."

He dropped it as if it had been a coal of fire and his face grew anguished. She relented a little.

"Yes; I am beginning to care for him, also

as a valued friend."

"No more?" eagerly.
"No more; no less."

"Ah then, I breathe more freely. But he loves you?"

"So he gives me to understand."

"So," and there was despondence in his voice.

"Do you not consider yourself as capable of inspiring love as Mr. Everard?" she asked, looking at him in a way that should have raised his hopes.

"No. At least our chances are not equal; for

he started in the race long after I did."

"It appears to me that should give you the

advantage."

"Oh, no. A woman is always carried away by everything new," he answered in some bitterness.

Here the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of a gay party just returned from sleighing, and he took his departure along with the other men.

It was the same way in the weeks that followed. Everard continued his assiduous attentions, and succeeded oftener than himself in becoming her escort to balls and box-parties, driving and skating; so that sometimes Weston bitterly accused himself of being a laggard in the pursuit for allowing his now acknowledged rival to get ahead of him. He even went so far as to tell her that she connived at it, and to reproach her for coquetry.

She saw that he was becoming jealous of Everard, and to punish him sometimes for such a visible display of it, tantalized him still more.

One evening, at a ball given in her own and Ethel's honor, she waltzed twice with Everard before granting Weston one number. Was it, he asked himself, because she still remembered his waltzing so long ago with Rita, and wished now to retaliate? If she really wished to make him suffer, surely she was getting in her revenge, for the iron entered deeply into his soul every time she danced with Everard, and his blanched face showed his agony. He bit his lip till the blood started, and such a scowl as she never expected to see on his face rested there as her partner at last seated her near where Weston was standing. She saw the look that he cast on his former friend, and she grew suddenly disturbed as the thought came to her that she was not merely paying him back, but causing estrangement between friends of long standing. So, feeling contrite, she contrived soon to catch his eye as he stood coldly aloof, and beckoned him to approach. He did so, but sulkily enough.

"I can give you the next number, if you wish

it," she said.

"I am not so sure that I want it," he an-

swered bitterly, almost rudely.

"Very well then; Mr. Barrington has asked me to arrange for him, and if you—"

He did not wait for her to finish, but seizing

her hand, led her out upon the floor.

In his bitter-sweet resentment he felt as if he would like to crush her till she should cry out; but gradually, as the soft rhythm and sway of the triple measure soothed his ruffled feelings, he would have been content to whirl on, and on, forever. He even thought of McLeod of Dare, in his mad race with the storm, bearing away his reluctant love to certain death upon the

jagged rocks of the Hebridean Isles, in the death-struggle with the raging waves. Later, he led her into the conservatory, his jealousy but half appeared.

"I forgot to tell you," she said suddenly, when they were seated apart, "that we are ex-

pecting Rita very soon."

"When?" he asked, pretending a much live-

lier interest than he really felt.

"Immediately after Christmas. I see how charmed you are, though you are endeavoring to conceal it."

"I am pleased. I have always admired her

very much."

"So I am aware. With a little encouragement from her you would soon be at her feet again," and now his very soul exulted as he thought he detected a trace of jealousy on her part.

"I have never understood why the engagement between her and her fiancé was broken;

do you know?"

"Perhaps it was on your account," she an-

swered, regarding him searchingly.

"Mine? You flatter me. I went to New Orleans, it is true, and visited her in her own home, but it was business of a different nature that took me to the city."

"Then you did seek her out?"

"Certainly. She had invited me to call if I should ever be in the city, and I would have been wanting in polite attention if I had not done so. Besides, as I have said, I like and ad-

mire her greatly. She is a true woman, and has less coquetry in her nature than some I know."

"Not even excepting present company?"

"Not even excepting present company," with

emphasis.

"Thank you. But interesting as your conversation is, I must return to my engagements. Come."

And thus, at cross-purposes they returned to the ball-room.

Rita came, just after the holidays, and Stella was truly delighted to meet her again under her own changed circumstances. Her letter of congratulation had been so sympathetic, so sweet and loving, that she cherished it still with grateful care. Not even the report that Weston had, within the last year, visited her with matrimonial intention, could chill her toward this warm-hearted girl.

"My dear, persecuted, heroic darling, how transported I am to see you looking so well, so beautiful, and so happy," was Rita's greeting as she held Stella lovingly for a few seconds in a close embrace. And Stella returned the caress

with equal warmth and sincerity.

"Give me another kiss, dear," said Nellie. "I am so grateful to you for making me a visit in my own house; but come right away, I must show you its greatest treasure without delay," and she proudly led the way to the nursery, where baby Catharine lay asleep in her cradle, looking like a pearl in its shell.

Rita, in her ecstasy, would not allow the little creature to continue its slumber, but caught it up impulsively to her own bosom. The child, soft and warm, cuddled in her arms, and the little curly head dropped confidingly on the beautiful woman's shoulder, making a picture that would have charmed the eyes of a Le Brun. Then the violet eyes closed again, and the little one was back to that "heaven that lies about us in our infancy."

Ethel linked her arm affectionately in that of Rita. "Come," said she, "it is nine, and you have your toilette to make. There are half a dozen of the men vying with each other as to which shall make the first engagement with you. Each one wishes to secure you for the bal du

saison, at Mrs. Cordell's, next week."

"How truly glad I am to see Stella in her natural sphere and that she has given up that foolish notion of nursing. She is so well qualified to adorn society, and she has become really beautiful."

"She is entirely a changed creature. None so bright and so witty as herself. All the men admire her extravagantly."

"And Mr. Weston, does he still pursue her?"

"He is madly in love, and is jealous to a degree of a Mr. Everard."

"Will he win her at last, do you think?"

"There is no telling. Stella has wonderful control over her feelings; must have acquired it in training; but I think it will be either he or Mr. Everard," and at the latter name an in-

voluntary sigh escaped her that was not lost on Rita.

"Then I hope it will be Weston—Mr. Willoughby. He has loved her so long and so faithfully."

"Dame Rumor had it a year ago that he was in New Orleans paying his addresses to you."

Rita laughed.

"To me! Dear, dear. Dame Rumor's hundred tongues are no exaggeration. He was there on some financial business, and saw me twice. I was half offended that his whole conversation, nearly, was about Stella. Voila tout."

"You must tell her so; for I think the report has had its influence. I sometimes believe she encourages Mr. Everard to score against Weston."

"Indeed then, I will; for he simply adores her."

The weeks that followed were a continuous whirl of gaiety, the votaries of fashion and pleasure appearing to contrive how much festivity might be brought into the weeks before Lent.

There had been, immediately after the removal of Stella's crushing burden, a violent reaction from the gloomy to the gay and joyous side of life; but now she found such excess of gaiety palling, and the pendulum was swinging back to her normal condition—that of a thoughtful, earnest womanhood.

Mr. Everard's persistent suit was becoming a gêne, since she now fully recognized that her

heart remained unresponsive. She chid herself that she had allowed matters to go so far, as it daily became more difficult to tell him the truth, and it was so repugnant to her frank nature that he must think her a vain coquette.

Somewhat believing the tale of Weston's reputed courtship of Rita, before Rita herself had denied it, she had been half willing that Everard should win her love, if he could. Now, however, she knew that his efforts in that direction were futile, and to undeceive him cost her a

painful anticipation.

A bal masque was now on the tapis, and the young women and young men of their set were agog over it. Will and Nellie were the givers, and they had ordered that all the arrangements should be unique, as well as perfect. The costumes were to be elaborate, and two prizes, one for the most original of either sex, were to be awarded, the men vying with the women in ingenuity and versimilitude to the original model. Consequently, there were characters taken from ancient and modern history, literature, mythology, and even the animal and vegetable kingdoms; and spirits of earth, air, and water.

Weston was determined to discover the identity of Stella, for it had been arranged that whatsoever swain should succeed in such recognition was to be entitled to attach himself to that parti, if so he elected, up to the time of the

unmasking, which was to be promptly at twelve o'clock.

Weston himself was resplendent in barbaric costume as Alaric, the Goth. He felt assured that Stella would appear in some puzzling character, and for days beforehand he ran over in thought all the striking personages of ancient and modern times that he believed would appeal to her fancy. But one after another he discarded the Zenobias, Boadiceas, Valkyries, Druidical Priestesses, et id omne genus, and when he had exhausted the list of all he remembered, he found himself as tantalizingly far off as ever. Clearly, he would have to wait for the procession to pass before he could get an ink-

ling.

The much-anticipated evening drew on at last, and to the blare of trumpets a martial procession of knights and heroes marched in and took their stand in a circle. Then to a marche mystique the procession of dames followed. This was to march once round the large interior circuit, face about, and march back, so as to afford the male masquers a better opportunity to recognize and select a partner. This procession had gone its whole length once before Weston could even suspect which masque might be Stella. He had thought he might detect her by her gait and figure, but so many of the dames were so much bedraped, and their march was so slow and measured to the music, that this was impossible. Half a dozen times he would be about to say, "It is she," and join her, when, uncertain, he would forbear, and suffer her to

pass by and be claimed by another.

Suddenly, however, without any other indication than the promptings of his heart, irresolution all gone, he attached himself to Comedy. and taking her arm masterfully in his own, whispered,

"My heart instructs me better than mine

eyes."

"'He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool,' saith the proverb," was the answer; and Comedy endeavored to pass by him and escape.

But Alaric answered,

"Nay; Mistress Comedy can escape when I am convinced of mistaken identity. Now she must listen. Alaric lays down the law in rude fashion, maybe, but his prisoner must submit to the terms of ransom. Come, then, Comedia Divina," and Comedy offered no further resistance, but accompanied the Conqueror to a quiet little nook which, screened from open view by some light trailing vines, was unoccupied save by themselves.

"Comedy," said Alaric, when they were seated, "you know me, and you know all the fervor of my heart's love. You know that I have loved you since we first met, and now I have come to the point where, if you deliberately reject my love, there will be nought left me but to make Tragedy my bride. Be serious for once, dear Comedy, and tell me if he is not to be rewarded who would lay down his life for you."

He had slipped his hand upon her own, and pressing it softly, repeated,

"Remember how long I have loved you."

There was no response in words, but he felt the hand that lay in his tremble. He pressed it to his lips and asked tenderly,

"You do care for me, dear, do you not?"

"Yes," came an agitated answer, and Alaric, transported, was lifting the masque to kiss the lips that had uttered the sweet monosyllable, when Comedy, pushing it aside completely, revealed the laughing face of *Rita*.

Alaric opened his mouth to speak, but ere he could recover from his surprise, Comedy, with a quick movement, curtsied low, and slipping

past him disappeared in the crowd.

"Great king of blunderers! suppose she takes me in earnest, and thinks I meant a bona-fide declaration to herself. How shall I extricate myself from such an embarrassing situation? But find her and undeceive her I must, for if Stella hears of it she will believe I spoke wittingly," exclaimed Alaric to himself, and immediately plunged into the crowd to find Comedy once more.

In vain he went hither and thither, up and down, but he could not for some considerable time catch so much as a glimpse of her. But at last his search was rewarded and he came upon her suddenly near where he had declared himself. He touched her on the arm, saying,

"Please give me but five minutes more. There is something of importance I wish to say to

you," and she accompanied him silently. He scarcely knew how to begin. It was not till she said,

"Eh, bien; monsieur, commencez," that he

said stammeringly,

"Mademoiselle Comédie, pray believe me, that what I said to you a little while ago was intended for the ear of another."

"Indeed? Then I am to infer that all your words have meant nothing, and that you have

been playing with my affections?"

The questioning voice was serious, even severe; and Alaric stood for a moment undecided what to say next. Could it be possible that Rita had a tender spot in her heart for him and had been willing to accept his vows of love? Really—

"I—I—beg a thousand pardons," he began awkwardly, "but I—I thought I knew you. It appears I was mistaken. Will you—will you

kindly consider those words unspoken?"

"Then you have really never cared for me? Has it been a pretense all along?"

"I hope you have not thought—"

"Thought what, sir?"

"That my attentions meant anything more than—"

"But your words, sir."

"My words—I must retract—I am afraid—"

"Very well, sir; from this time forth-"

"Ah, I entreat you to pardon a mistake—"

"I do so with pleasure. I have never be-

lieved that you really cared for me. Let us

from this time forth be as strangers-"

The voice had changed strangely as she spoke. Alaric raised his hand suddenly, gave a dexterous little jerk to the masque and lifted it. The face beneath was *Stella's*.

"So," said she, brimming with mirth, "you have confessed to the truth at last! It is well, sir," and she also slipped away, leaving him

astonished.

"Well," exclaimed he, "if this is not a Comedy of Errors I don't know what it could be called!" and he walked away vexed but smiling, recognizing that it had been a put-up trick between Stella and Rita.

Later, when Stella was chaffing him, he said,

laughingly,

"At any rate, you see that you are not the

only rose on the bush."

"Why don't you use the classic phrase, 'the only pebble on the beach'?"

"It would be more appropriate, since your

heart is as hard as a stone."

She laughed lightly, and smiling at him tan-

talizingly said,

"I am quite ready to admit that you are something above the ordinary."

"What?"

"A night-blooming serious."

"A blooming idiot," he growled.

"For why?" with a mocking glance.

"I ought to be taken out and shot, for dang-

ling after a woman who only uses me as a butt for her heartless railleries."

"You couldn't be shot on a charge of deser-

tion," she murmured softly.

"Stella," he cried suddenly, seizing her hand and crushing it in his own, "why do you keep me on the rack? Why do you not either accept me or send me adrift?"

"For a good and simple reason. I like you too well to suffer you to become a *derelict*, and yet not assuredly enough to trust myself to your pilotage on the great deeps of matrimony."

"But you surely should know me in all these

years?"

"No; I must watch and wait,

"'Till such a tide, as moving, seems asleep, Too full for sound or foam —

shall sweep me off my feet, and bear me away irresistibly on its bosom, trustful and unafraid," she said smilingly, but regarding him earnestly.

"What can I do more than I have done to prove my love?" he asked bitterly, remember-

ing all that he had really done.

A pang smote her as she saw his expression, and it touched her, all unconscious of what that reality was; and she laid her hand almost tenderly upon his arm.

"I have a proposition to make to you," she said softly. "If you will not mention the subject to me again for six months I will take that

period for an earnest consideration; and probably at the expiration of that time I shall be able to decide."

"Six months! six æons!"

Ignoring his exclamation, she continued,

"You see, I had a great deal to forget; and after we met again, and you—you began to make love to me, as a woman, I had to go back to those early days and come down to the present by another pathway; and—and—just as I was about to take up the thread where it had been broken, that terrible stroke fell, and put an end to everything, almost reason, or life itself. Then the sudden lifting of that horrible nightmare was so sudden and unexpected that it left me dazed and bewildered, so that I hardly dared say to myself, 'Is this really I?' without fearing that another bolt might fall and shatter my very being. Can you wonder that I require time to know myself?"

He put out a hand impulsively and laid it with almost a paternal tenderness on her head.

"Pray forgive me. I know I am an impatient and inconsiderate fool to annoy you. It shall be as you say."

She remarked his expression of deep disap-

pointment, however, and continued,

"Do you not see that my heart is not in all this frivolity? That I am using it rather as a passetemps, till I can fathom the depths, or perhaps the shallows, of my nature?"

"Take your time; only do come to a decision

at the end of it," he replied.

"I will. Besides," smiling archly, "there is another momentous matter for me to decide."

"What is it?" he asked, much wondering.

"There's Mr. Bloomington."

The strain on Weston relaxed, and he threw

back his head and laughed.

"Well, I should retire in favor of that rival. Stella, I really believe you have a little coquetry in your composition."

"Why, he's very handsome, isn't he?"

"As the waxen face of a tailor's model is handsome; and quite as expressionless."

"And he has, it is affirmed, immense wealth."

"Hush, hush! I will not listen to such outrageous trifling. I have no fear of Bloomington. Would I could say as much of Everard."

"Ah! there is a man to admire." Weston grew instantly grave again.

"I grant it," he said gloomily, and half turned away.

"Let me tell you a little secret," she whis-

pered.

"What is it?"

"I have at last, and finally, given him his congé," and added, "with a push toward Ethel."

"Thank God!" and mountains seemed to roll

away from his breast.

Bloomington, flushed and hurried with eager quest, here burst in upon them.

"I have sought you everywhere, Miss Hope;

our number is nearly ended."

"Is it? I'm so sorry. I didn't know it had been so long. I beg your pardon," and giving him her hand, she went, casting a glance over her shoulder at Weston that consoled him for her departure.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

The last social affair of the season, before Lent, was to be given by Mr. Bloomington to the visiting girls. He was to be assisted by several of the most inventive and original matrons, and it was looked forward to with much speculation and interest.

It went without saying that it would be unique, and, in view of Mr. Bloomington's great

wealth, splendid.

Nellie came one morning into the room where

Rita, Stella, and Ethel were sitting.

Rita, who had just finished reading a letter, looked up, smiling and blushing happily.

"Girls," said she, "I invite you all to a wed-

ding in April."

"Whose?" they inquired with one voice.

"My very own."

"Oh! then you and Gerald have at last bridged the chasm! I'm so glad! I wish you all the happiness the world can afford!" exclaimed Ethel, in which wish Nellie and Stella joined very heartily, kissing the bride-to-be.

"Yes; I am to-day the happiest girl in the United States. It was very silly of me to break the engagement, but it has been worth it to discover how much we really loved each other."

When the flow of talk had somewhat sub-

sided, Nellie said,

"Here, girls, are the invitations to Mr.

Bloomington's affair. It is to be a Fête Crystale."

"And pray, what is that?" asked Rita.

"I will read to you Mrs. Bennidge's explanatory remarks." And as she proceeded, they all exclaimed in delight,

"Oh! it will be like Fairyland!"

"Gorgeous!"
"Beautiful!"

"Unique, indeed!"

It was to be a skating tournament upon one of the lakes, and in all its appointments was to be magnificently complete. The lake was to be most brilliantly illuminated by means of many electric wires stretched above it, from which were to depend myriads of bulbs casting a silvery light upon the skaters beneath. The skaters themselves representing the Frost People were to be clad in fancy costumes of white, flashing with the scintillating gleams of willians of screening and cilcuminated.

millions of crystal and silver jewels.

There was to be a magnificent crystal Royal Car, drawn by six polar bears, whose shaggy fur was to glisten with ice-pendants, within whose mechanism would be concealed the small naphtha engines that were to form the motive power. A very full band was to furnish appropriate music for the evolutions of the skaters, and after the latter a queen was to be chosen, a coronation to take place, followed by a triumphal procession around the circumference of the lake, headed by the car of the queen and her maids of honor, followed immediately by five

glittering male attendants, the whole company of skaters bringing up the rear, and the entire gorgeous *cortége* making such a brilliant spectacle for the non-participant guests, in their comfortable carriages around the shore, as should be long remembered.

"Stella," remarked Rita at the close of the reading, "I am afraid the St. Louis belles will have much merriment over our attempts at skating." Ethel had learned the previous winter. Will came in at that moment and the diffi-

culty was stated.

"Don't let that daunt you," said he. "I will undertake to perfect you within the ten days preceding. We will go privately each day to some less frequented place, and at the expiration of the time I guarantee to produce three most accomplished patineuses."

"Will the ice be firm enough to support the weight of such a throng?" inquired Nellie, a

trifle apprehensively.

"Certainly, if the weather continues as cold as now. Thousands skate daily, but as the surface of the ice has been roughened by so many skates enough water will be turned on to freeze on its surface and render the ice perfectly smooth for that occasion."

There could have been no more propitious weather for the *fête*. Cold, crisp, and still, it did indeed look like an arctic festival of the Frost-Folk, as, to the blare of wild-strange music, and the rosy flashes of an artificial au-

rora borealis at some little distance shooting up in long streams toward the zenith, the skaters in their coruscating costumes, pair by pair, emerged from the lake-house and glided away

gracefully upon the broad sheet of ice.

One tremendous shout of admiration went up from the many spectators who watched with delighted eyes the intricate preconcerted evolutions, as circling, winding, wheeling and gracefully swaying, in perfect time to the inspiring music, they moved with almost the precision of a military parade.

When these evolutions had been concluded, a queen was selected, and, as many had prophesied, the choice fell upon Stella, and right royal did she look as mounted upon the throne of her car, with her maids-of-honor a little lower, and their especial knights immediately following with the whole convoy of skaters in the train,

they started briskly off around the lake.

Never had Weston's heart beaten so triumphantly as on this occasion. All his ambitious hopes and projects for Stella's advancement in life, and all the homage of his own heart were at once gratified by this public acclaim of her beauty and popularity; and, on this night particularly, buoyed by the exhilaration of brisk exercise, the crisp air and the gorgeousness of the scene, fair Fortune reared her smiling face and beamed upon him. He now knew that she did not care for Everard, and the idea of Bloomington was preposterous. He knew that he, himself, stood nearest the throne, and might before long be crowned with her love.

The thought was ecstasy, and casting all doubt and despondency aside, he for the first time dared glory in the happiness before him.

Alas! how often when one feels at the very acme of one's desires and aspirations, there comes, as it were, a psycho-seismic shock that

tumbles one's air-castles to the ground.

It was so now. Weston was so absorbed that his eyes were, metaphorically, turned inward, and insensibly he had lagged a little behind his skating companions. A crash, and a multiple shriek of feminine voices brought this fact like a flash to his consciousness, and one fearful explanation came with lightning revelation to him.

The ice had broken!

And what had been the result? Wild with fear for the safety of Stella and the other occupants of the car, he dashed forward. Thank God! the car was all right, on ahead, and the young women safe. But there was a yawning black hole in the ice around which his four companions were standing with terrified faces and paralyzed limbs.

"For Heaven's sake, what's to pay?" he

cried as he came up.

"Miss Hope—she is down in there, and we are waiting for her to come up that we may rescue her!"

"Waiting?" shouted Weston fiercely. "She has slipped under the *ice!*" And throwing off his encumbering mantle, wild with agonizing

apprehension, he leaped headlong into the black

aperture.

The horror of the spectacle seemed to paralyze every one. The flying seconds lengthened, seemingly, into hours, so unspeakable was the suspense.

"Great God!" burst at last from the lips of

Everard, "they will both be drowned!"

Yet for others to plunge would not help, though many were ready to risk everything if only the victims might for an instant appear on the surface. But in the water whose depth no one knew, freezing at the very instant, what must be the result? for not even the most expert diver, or swimmer, could hold out more than a few seconds under water in such a gelid condition.

But Everard stepped to the brink of the chasm, and shouted aloud,

"This way, Weston; come this way!"

It was a timely call; for Weston, struggling desperately under the ice with Stella in his grasp, was bewildered and drowning, not know-

ing which way to turn.

The car had been going more rapidly when the ice broke, but the forward part had glided on to a firm position. Only the rear part had careened and dipped just sufficiently to precipitate Stella from her elevated position; and impelled by that backward impetus, she had been hurled a short distance under the ice in a depth of twelve or fifteen feet. The result of which was, that in rising she had impinged against the thick floor above, and sunk again; and had not Weston, with a flash of inspiration, divined this, she would most certainly have been drowned. Again Everard called, "This way, Weston!" hoping almost against hope that he would hear and comprehend; and, if power were left him, swim in that direction.

Fortunately, the sound did reach the drowning man, and a moment later he appeared in the open space, still retaining his hold on the queen

of the fête.

The crowd that had till this moment looked on, dumb and helpless, now gave a joyful shout, and the encouraging sound gave a new impulse

to Weston's efforts.

A chain of hands was formed and Everard, with great peril, leaned over the half-sub-merged edge and gripped Weston with his free hand and held him till the others lying upon the ice could draw himself and Stella upon the firm surface. Both were hurried to the Lake-house, and everything known to the science of resuscitation was done for them that human skill could do.

CHAPTER XXXIX

Two years have elapsed; and one morning Stella is summoned to see a caller who has refused to send up his card. Much wondering, she enters the room, when a very heavily-bearded individual rises to meet her. He introduces himself,

"I am Richard Stockton, my dear; your mother's brother who, so many years ago, list-ened to the 'Call of the Wild' and went West," and he bent forward to kiss her; but Stella impulsively threw her arms round his neck and returned his salute with a burst of gratitude.

"A thousand welcomes, my dear Uncle!"

Richard Stockton was disconcerted. So long neglectful of his niece, he scarcely expected to be welcomed at all. Such an affectionate reception was absolutely embarrassing. Stella hastened to add,

"Your generosity in educating me, as well as all your kindness and munificence since, deserves and has won my life-long gratitude."

The visitor grew still more embarrassed. He blushed to the roots of his grizzled hair, as he

shyly regarded his niece.

"Well now, child," said he confusedly, "I might have done all that, it is true; but the fact is, it never occurred to me. I have been for a number of years in the Klondyke,—not without

some success,—and hereafter I will do the hand-

some thing by my sister's daughter."

A hundred little circumstances now flashed over Stella's memory; and the real benefactor was revealed. A gush of sudden tears quite terrified her bewildered relative. She excused herself a moment and touched an electric button. A servant immediately appeared, to whom she gave some direction in an undertone, and then returned to her uncle.

At that moment a gentleman entered unannounced. With lashes still wet, but with a happy smile, she took the new-comer by the hand

and advancing said,

"Permit me, Uncle Stockton, to present to you the noblest, best, and dearest man in all the world, my husband, William Willoughby, known to all our friends as "Weston"; and here," as the servant returned, "is your sixmonths'-old namesake, Master Richard Stockton Willoughby."

